

*At a*  
TEMPTING  
LADY'S  
SERVICE  
LUCY  
LANGTON

# At a Tempting Lady's Service

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

LUCY LANGTON

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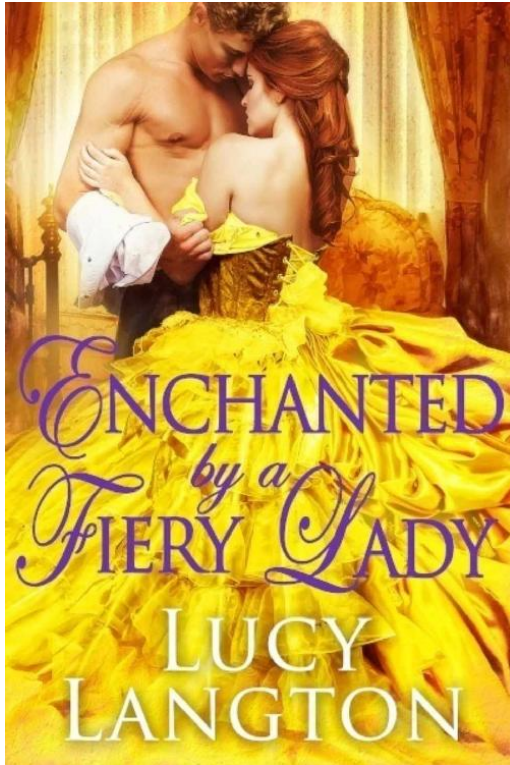
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## At a Tempting Lady's Service

## Introduction

Even though the overbearing parents of Lady Felicia Casey expect her to marry for wealth and fortune, she is not at all tempted by fine gowns, busy parties and the luxuries of high society. She would much rather spend her days enjoying the freedom of the countryside, where she would be able to focus on her love for drawing. When her closest friend, the Duchess of Montgomery, invites Felicia to stay with her for the summer, she couldn't be more excited. However, the very last thing she expected was to be captivated by the seductive gaze of the art tutor she meets at her friend's estate. Even though she knows that such an attraction is forbidden, she dares to dance on the wild side. Risking to tarnish her name, will she dare to surrender her heart to the most alluring man she has ever met?

Mr Ernest Reed is the enticing master gardener that works for the Duke of Montgomery. However, he is much more than that, as he happens to also be a very talented painter. Ever since he was a child, he dreamt of becoming a renowned artist, whose paintings will one day capture everyone's hearts. Nonetheless, when he is introduced as a drawing tutor to the stunning Lady Felicia, his fiery dreams begin to change. He is instantly enraptured by her alluring beauty and quick wit, making it hard for him to resist the sparks that are flying between them. Soon, he will be completely unable to forget her magnetic brown eyes that set his body and soul on fire. Fearing this summer



affair will burn into nothing more than dust, will he dare to defy everything and fight for what he deeply desires?

More than anything, Lady Felicia and Ernest get to discover a world full of love and endless lust. After sharing their first passionate kiss, they are completely enchanted by each other and their flaming chemistry is undeniable. However, as honour is clashing with irresistible desire, it's difficult to tell if their lustful journey will survive the threats casting their shadow upon it. As another wave of bad luck hits and their burning affair is exposed, will they be able to mend their tattered reputation and bravely face the scandal? Or will everything that has made their blazing love grow be taken away from them forever?

## Chapter 1

Lady Felicia Casey sat in the second row of pews in the church in the centre of Town. The church was the largest in Town, fitting for the marriage of a duke. The stained glass windows depicted the popular stories in the Bible, and though they were beautiful, all eyes were focused forward.

Felicia's eyes were fixated on Lady Sierra, soon to be Duchess of Montgomery. Sierra's white laced hands were resting in the Duke's; her brown eyes focused only on him. Felicia sighed, thinking that her best friend was the luckiest woman in the world to be marrying for love.

"She should have worn a satin gown," Lady Casey, Felicia's mother, whispered to Felicia.

"It's a very lovely gown for Miss Sierra," commented Lord Casey, Felicia's father.

Felicia sat in the middle of the two of them, always the one to create space between them, so they didn't have to be bothered by one another. Yet, her father had already butted in with his opinion, which he was always quick to give.

"But she is marrying a duke. She should have worn the finest gown money could buy," Lady Casey whispered back. Felicia sighed once more, always hating being caught in the middle of her parents' bickering.

*Why do they have to bicker on such a wonderful day?* Felicia thought as she kept her eyes on Sierra. All the while, her parents commented on the gown, to the coat and trousers the duke was wearing.

“At least His Grace has chosen a fine wedding outfit,” Lady Casey whispered. “Surely his good opinion of fashion will rub off on his wife.”

Lord Roberts was wearing a black as night coat and trousers that had been lined in gold thread. In Felicia’s opinion, Sierra was the most beautiful woman dressed in the church. Her pearl coloured gown flowed around her with a long train of lace. Gold thread was weaved through the hem and the bodice of the gown. A beautiful terra was pinned in her long blonde hair where the vela of sheer material covered her face.

“My good opinion of fashion has yet to rub off on you,” replied Lord Casey.

Felicia closed her eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. She prayed silently that no one would notice the heated expression on her mother’s face or the way her father stuck up his nose at his wife.

“If there are any that would oppose this marriage, do speak now,” said the priest in his booming voice. Felicia relished in the silence, thinking that at least her parents had a good sense of when to be perfectly silent. But as soon as the couple exchanged their vows, her parents were back at it.

“I’ll have you know that young ladies look to me for fashion advice,” Lady Casey said. “Just as Felicia. She will tell you.”

“You are one of the loveliest women in attendance, Mama,” Felicia was quick to say, knowing how to appease her mother.

Lady Casey was dressed in a gorgeous light blue satin gown with dark blue lace trim at the neckline, hem, and sleeve cuff. Her dark blonde hair was curled and pinned with pearl-encrusted pins. A large light blue hat rested on her head like a crown with large white plum feathers poking out of the top. Her mother certainly knew how to make an impression in society.

In comparison, Lord Casey wore a navy-blue coat, a pressed muslin shirt, and light blue trousers to match his wife. Silver thread had been used to embroider designs in the cuff of his sleeves and trousers. Together, her parents were among the most fashionable couples in attendance besides the bride and groom themselves. Since her father was an earl and a successful businessman, they could both flaunt their wealth.

Felicia, on the other hand, had settled for a simple emerald gown of muslin and lace. She was comfortable in her gown and felt pretty enough, even though it was not her intention. After all, this was Sierra’s day, and as the bride, she should shine the most. It was a concept her parents didn’t seem to comprehend.

When the ceremony came to completion, and Lord Roberts folded back Sierra’s veil, Felicia held her breath as the couple that truly loved one another shared a tender kiss. It wasn’t a quick, chaste kiss that couples often shared at weddings when it was a marriage of convenience.

Instead, it was a kiss that lasted just long enough to show everyone in

attendance that they were truly in love. Considering that most of the Ton were sitting in the church, no one would dare say that Lord Roberts and Lady Sierra hadn't married for love alone.

The congregation stood as the couple faced the crowd together. Felicia clapped her hands in excitement as they headed down the aisle, arm in arm as they made their way towards the open church doors waving at everyone in return. There would be a wedding brunch at the duke's townhouse before the newlyweds took their leave to the countryside for their honeymoon. Lord Roberts' countryseat was rumoured to be a massive estate that Sierra had said she was looking forward to being mistress over.

"I shall plan the menu each day with the housekeeper, and if the estate needs a feminine touch, I shall speak with the butler about making the necessary improvements," Sierra had told Felicia not two nights ago when they had visited at her parents' townhouse.

"You shall be too busy with your husband to think about food," Felicia had teased. "The thrills of passion and being a wife will keep you in bed that the last thing you'll think about is what meals to plan."

"Felicia, you are so naughty," Sierra had whispered. "But I do look forward to the wedding night." The young ladies had giggled all night, making Felicia hope that one day she would be able to marry for love as well.

Now, as she followed Sierra's parents down the aisle towards the church's open doors, the married couple already in the duke's carriage and heading towards his townhouse, Felicia couldn't help wondering when it would be her turn to marry. She and Felicia had both attended the previous Season in Town, but it was only Sierra who had captured the attention of eligible gentlemen.

As Felicia walked behind her parents, who, of course, had to stop from time to time to talk to other wedding guests, she wondered why she hadn't been successful this past Season. Perhaps it was the fact that she didn't enjoy balls as Sierra did.

Felicia found them quite overwhelming instead of magical or romantic. She preferred drawing compared to socializing or taking long walks outside instead of attending tea parties. She felt she didn't have the same things to talk of that concerned other young ladies.

Things that her mother was overly concerned about. The latest fashion. The most eligible gentleman in Town. The wealthiest family in Town. The latest gossip of the Ton. All these things her mother was very knowledgeable about. The same with many of the young ladies she had been introduced to by Sierra at balls. But none of these things interested or concerned Felicia one bit.

"Felicia, darling. Don't slouch," her mother said over her shoulder.

Felicia straightened her posture the best she could, not wanting her mother to bicker at her later for not trying her hardest to look her best in public.

Felicia gazed around the church as she stuck close to her parents. No one in the entire church interested her enough that she wanted to speak with them. She only wanted to make her way to the duke's townhouse, where close friends and family were gathering to enjoy a meal before the couple went away to the countryside. She wanted to spend as much time with Sierra as possible before she truly had to say goodbye.

It was a small relief when she could finally step up into her father's carriage outside the church. It was a beautiful spring day where the weather hinted at summer. The sun was shining, without a single cloud to obstruct the light. It was truly a perfect day.

Felicia sat on one side of the carriage with her mother while her father sat on the other. After three taps to the side of the carriage, the driver flicked the reins to the horses and had them stepping forward to take them to the duke's townhouse, the carriage rumbling along the cobblestone roads of London, England.

"Felicia, can you believe the hat Lady Minton was wearing? Who would ever wear black feathers to a wedding? That is quite unsightly," Lady Casey said, trying to entertain herself with a bit of gossip.

"If black is unsightly on a wedding day, perhaps the groom then shouldn't wear a black coat and trousers," Felicia observed, hoping to put her mother off speaking to her. She didn't dare entertain her mother's gossip habit, or she would be talking the entire time in the carriage.

"It's unsightly for a woman," Lady Casey said, correcting her daughter. "Really, my dear. You should know better. I have taught you all I know about fashion, etiquette, and the way of high society."

"Of course, Mother," Felicia replied, focusing her eyes on the passing buildings of Town. There were so many people about that day that she could easily see herself disappearing into the sea of people and just being herself for once. But that thought was shattered as the carriage came to a halt once more.

Felicia followed her parents into the luxurious townhouse of Lord Roberts. She had dined at the duke's home before, finding it quite lovely. It wasn't over the top like her parents' own home. Instead, everything was nicely done and thought out. From the hardwood floors to the flowers kept in white vases in the foray. Felicia believed that the duke had better taste than Sierra should give him credit for.

"My word, Lady Sierra is so lucky," Lady Casey said as they entered the house. "She will never want for anything. Felicia, my dear, you should ask the duke if he has a cousin you could marry. It is high time you follow your dear friend's good example."

"Yes, Mother," Felicia replied, feeling mortified by the comment. She glanced at the footmen, seeing how they were holding back their laughter at such a statement.

Felicia followed her parents into the large dining room, seeing small white tables set up all over for guests to sit and congregate. She spotted Sierra and her husband walking about the room, visiting with the guests. Sierra looked truly happy, a bright smile on her face as her long brown hair framed her heart-shaped face.

"Come, let us sit," Lord Casey said, gesturing towards an empty table.

"Why sit when there are prestigious families to speak with?" Lady Casey questioned.

"Do as you please," Lord Casey said with a huff, going over to sit at an empty table and have a footman bring him a plate of food from the large buffet on the side of the room. All sorts of marvellous things had been prepared from a slowly roasted goose that was quite plump to several puddings and tarts baked for the special occasion. Roasted



spring vegetables were paired with cold soups smelling of exotic spices.

Felicia knew at that moment she had to make a choice. She could either side with her father to enjoy the wedding feast, like most wedding guests. Or she could side with her mother and follow her around the dining room to visit with everyone invited by the wedding couple to attend the brunch.

Seeing an opportunity for escape, Felicia made her way towards the buffet table where she saw Sierra standing alone, trying to grab a bite to eat between visiting the families with the duke. Being such close friends with Felicia, she knew her parents wouldn't complain if she were spotted speaking with a duchess in public.

"You are absolutely gorgeous, Your Grace," Felicia said as she approached.

"Come now," said Sierra. "We've been close friends since we could talk. I don't think titles are necessary." Sierra took a tart from a silver serving tray and plopped it into her mouth, chewing quickly before washing it down with a glass of sherry.

"Are you doing alright?" Felicia asked.

"This has been such a wonderful day, but I'm afraid if I don't eat anything now, I shall faint during the trip to the countryside," Sierra admitted. "Who knew being married could be such work?"

"Well, I am happy for you and Lord Roberts. The two of you deserve

one another,” Felicia said.

“How are you faring the wedding?” Sierra asked, looking towards her parents. “I’m thinking Father is ready to retire for the day already, and Mother is red in the face from all the smiling; she is so happy.”

“I feel the same as your father,” Felicia admitted. “I long to return home and take to the parlour where I may draw to my heart’s content. It is far better than having to listen to my parents bicker about fashion or food.”

“If Lord and Lady Casey can find a fault in anything, they’ll be quick to tell the other,” Sierra said with a sigh. “If only you had been so successful this past Season. Then we would both be married to men we love and escaping the harsh eye of the Ton.”

“You must write to me when you have retired to the Montgomery Estate. Tell me what it is like in the countryside, and I shall reply forthwith. That is, as long as you have the time to write between your adventures in the bedchamber and eating a bit of food to recover your energy,” Felicia teased.

“My dear, one day I hope you meet a man as naughty as you. You will need a man with plenty of passion to tame your desires,” Sierra said softly, leaning towards Felicia as she spoke before eating another tart. Felicia just chuckled as she shook her head.

“I fear I may not meet a man as you have. I should just settle for a marriage of convenience to be rid of my parents,” Felicia said with a sigh.

“You will find love one day, my dearest friend. I just know it,” Sierra said, patting Felicia’s shoulder.

“Did you find something suitable to eat?” Lord Roberts asked as he joined their small party. “I’m about to eat an entire goose breast myself.”

“But you’ll ruin your nice clothing,” Sierra said with a smile.

“The wedding ceremony has come to a glorious end, and now I am famished,” Lord Roberts said with a chuckle. “I need to eat something.”

“I’ll leave you two to feast,” Felicia said with a curtsy.

“Lady Felicia, I hope that you will come to visit us soon,” Sierra spoke up, looking towards her husband for approval.

“Indeed,” the duke added. “As my dearest wife’s best friend, you should certainly join us in a few weeks’ time.”

Felicia was rooted in her spot, thinking quite an invitation was too soon to extend, considering the honeymoon they would soon be on.

“That is very kind of you, Your Grace. I shall write in a few weeks to ensure that such an offer still stands. I can only imagine the type of privacy a newly married couple might want for months to come,”

Felicia said with a smirk. This made the duke laugh openly as Sierra clearly blushed.

Felicia made her way back to her father's table as he thoroughly enjoyed the wedding feast. She thought it was best to leave the recently married couple alone while they ate, and though Felicia wasn't very hungry, she thought it would be good to at least eat something.

"Try the roasted goose, Felicia," Lord Casey said between bites. Felicia just nodded in reply.

When the footman brought her a plate of food from the buffet, an arrangement of delicious things to eat, Felicia simply picked at her food as she gazed around the room. She spotted her mother socializing with other women in attendance, laughing freely as she remained ever posed and composed. Felicia felt she didn't have the same type of charm as her mother, nor desired to be the centre of attention.

"Felicia, you should take care to be married before too long," her father spoke up. "Like your dear friend, you should marry for wealth at your soonest convenience. Though you may not be able to catch a duke, an earl would be suitable."

"Of course, Father," was all Felicia could think to say, considering how often this line of conversation had appeared with her parents since Sierra had announced her engagement.

The time eventually came for Felicia to say her goodbyes to Sierra as the couple prepared to leave the townhouse. They had both left the dining room to change into their travelling clothes. Sierra was now wearing a gorgeous cream gown that Felicia thought was very soft as

she hugged her dear friend and said her goodbyes.

“You may always write to me,” Sierra said softly as she looked into Felicia’s blue eyes. “I will be sure to respond in a timely manner.”

“You’ve always been the best of friends,” Felicia said as she let go of Sierra. “I will surely miss you, but my happiness for you outweighs that of my sorrow. You are a beautiful bride and will no doubt have many happy days with your husband.”

“I certainly hope so,” Sierra said with a soft laugh as she hugged Felicia once more before turning to her parents to say her goodbyes. As soon as the couple was ready, they departed from the house and made their way to the waiting carriage. A part of Felicia wanted to go with them, but she knew it would be terribly inappropriate.

Felicia sighed as she returned to the dining room, where the wedding celebration continued. She saw that her father was now conversing with other gentlemen, laughing and enjoying a glass of sherry. In a sea of people, Felicia felt utterly alone now that her dearest childhood friend was gone.

Slowly, Felicia made her way around the dining room, thinking that if she walked, she was doing something productive. Her mother had said that walking allowed her to display her slender figure. She used it as a way to pass the time.

Eventually, when the feasting came to an end, Felicia was able to step up into the carriage after her parents and relish in the knowledge that she would soon be home. At least there, she would be alone and content. She would draw until no longer feeling sadness about losing her friend to her lover.

## Chapter 2

*My dearest Sierra,*

*I hope this letter finds you well. It has been four weeks since we last saw one another, and I feel enough time has passed to write to you and enquire about your happiness in the countryside. I have continued as normal, drawing in the parlour and taking frequent walks in the garden to pass the time. With the Season over and the heat of the summer making Town miserable, at least my parents have not pushed me to attend any social functions.*

*I long to know how you are faring,*

*Yours truly,*

*Lady Felicia*

Felicia thought about the letter she'd sent her dear friend a few weeks ago, hoping to receive a reply soon. She felt she had waited an appropriate amount of time before enquiring about her happiness. But more than anything, she hoped that a letter to the new duchess would produce a reply that would allow her to leave Town for the time being. She dearly wished for a holiday away from her parents and in the company of her closest friend.

Felicia was in the parlour early, the morning a week after she'd posted her letter to Sierra, with her drawing paper stretched out on the table below the open window. A warm summer breeze was blowing through the window, forcing her to use a teacup and pot to hold down her

paper so the wind would not blow it away. With a graphite pencil in hand, she sketched what came to mind.

Sometimes Felicia would create replicas of the wonderful gardens she had seen when participating at various balls. Throughout the night, she would venture to the gardens, looking out over the trees, bushes, and flowers to take in the splendour that was nature at night. Then at home, she would try to recreate the scene from memory and use her graphite pencils to create the image in black and white.

Drawing was the only kind of relief she felt from the type of home life she had to endure. From the moment her parents woke up to the moment they retired for the evening, they were constantly bickering. They would argue about everything and anything that came to mind. Her father would try to impose his opinion on her mother, and in return, Lady Casey would do her best to prove her husband wrong.

Therefore, Felicia stayed out of their way and remained alone in the parlour where she knew only the maids would disturb her. The household had a good housekeeper that always ensured that Felicia ate when she lost track of time as she focused on her drawings. As long as she could stay busy and enjoy what she was doing, Felicia didn't care what her parents were fighting about, and she had long given up on trying to get them to stop.

Deep down inside, Felicia knew that her parents were miserable with one another. They had married for convenience only, and since she was an only child, it told Felicia that her parents disliked each other so much that they weren't willing to try for another child. Her father had a cousin that would inherit title and estate when he and her mother passed away. Therefore, it was up to Felicia to marry for wealth to support her the rest of her life.

However, wealth had never appealed to Felicia. She wore fine gowns

because her mother insisted that she wore the most fashionable fabrics. When she was alone, Felicia dressed in simple linen and cotton gowns because she found them more comfortable. As she drew, she would roll up her gowns' sleeves and wear an apron to protect the material from the graphite paper's smudge.

Felicia knew she could live the rest of her life happy if she could just draw. She wasn't sure if her future husband would approve of such hobbies since most young ladies were most interested in playing the piano or cushion embroidery. From what Felicia had learned about society, a gentleman wanted a pretty face for a wife, not someone that was talented in one thing or another. Therefore, it was no wonder that the duke had fallen in love with Sierra. She was a true beauty.

Felicia's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of giggling. She sighed as she looked towards the closed parlour door. She was up early, far earlier than what she would have expected of her parents. Therefore, she was certain her mother did not know she was in there as she ushered her lover from the house.

"I don't want to leave you," said a husky voice.

"But you must before my husband rises for the day," Lady Casey replied. "I will write to you soon."

Felicia then heard passionate kissing that made her stomach sick. She didn't want to hear how her mother's lips smacked wetly against her lovers. Then, she heard the front door open and close, ever so softly, before hearing the footsteps of her mother hurrying back to her bedchamber upstairs. Felicia sighed as she tried to focus on her drawing once more. The fact that her parents took lovers was no secret to her. She just wished it would one day stop, so she didn't have to hear such nonsense.



A light knocking came to the parlour door sometime later. Felicia was so lost in her drawing that she hadn't paid much attention to the passing of time. She called over her shoulder for whoever to enter. She smiled when she saw her ladies' maid, Miss Mathews, enter the room with a tea tray.

"You must be famished, My Lady," Miss Mathews said as she entered and set the tray down on the table beside her drawings. "I see you've been hard at work this morning."

"I find the morning and evening sunlight are the best to work in," Felicia explained. "Thank you for bringing me breakfast."

"Of course, My Lady. The post has just arrived, and I wanted to deliver you this letter," Miss Mathews said as she pulled a letter from her apron pocket and presented it to Felicia.

Felicia's heart began to race as she took the letter even though she had graphite smudges on her fingers that stained the envelope's fine paper. When she saw that the letter was from the Duchess of Montgomery, she felt a wave of excitement wash over her as she flipped the letter over and pulled at the wax seal till it gave way. She unfolded the letter and began to read with earnest as Miss Mathews poured her a cup of tea.

*My dear Felicia,*

*Thank you kindly for your letter. It was with great joy that I did receive it. The passing of time had not been known to me. I have enjoyed being married so much. It was not till your letter that I realized that four weeks*

*had passed. I wish you could experience this same happiness that I have felt since our parting.*

*With this letter, please let Lord and Lady Casey know that you are formally invited to join us in the countryside for the rest of the summer. Both Lord Roberts and I look forward to you coming to stay with us. I am intent now on finding you a good match, and since many lords have retired to the country during the heat of summer, I am confident I could be a good matchmaker for you.*

*I look forward to your arrival,*

*Lady Sierra Roberts, Duchess of Montgomery*

Felicia was overwhelmed by such happiness that she could hardly contain her glee. She handed the letter back to Miss Mathews and said, "Please take this letter to my parents right away. And then have my trunks prepared to journey to the countryside. I have been invited to stay with the duke and duchess, and you'll surely join me as well."

"I do love the countryside," Miss Mathews said with a smile. "And I have never worked in a duke's home before."

"It shall be a lavish experience for us both," Felicia said with a smile. "I will need fine gowns for dining with the duke and duchess, as well as their guests for dinner parties."

"Of course, My Lady. I shall go right away," Miss Mathews said with a curtsy. She then left Felicia to share the news with her parents before preparing to leave right away.

Felicia was so happy that she could hardly think of what she needed to do first. She stood from the table, cleaning her hands on her apron before she took the cool, damp cloth on the tea tray to finish scrubbing her hands and fingers clean of graphite. She then sat on the other side of the table as she sipped her peppermint tea, enjoying a plate of poached eggs and buttered toast. She had just finished eating when her mother flew into the room.

“My word, my dear Felicia! What great news from the duchess,” Lady Casey exclaimed. “It is so good of her to extend such an offer to you. There may still be hope for you yet this year to marry.”

“I am pleased to see you are happy about the letter. I told Miss Mathews to prepare my things immediately so I may begin my travels today,” Felicia said as she sipped her tea.

“Of course,” Lady Casey said. “Your father has certainly agreed to you leaving Town and will send two footmen with you to ensure you arrive at the duke’s estate well.”

“Miss Mathews will be coming with me as well,” Felicia stated.

“Certainly the duchess will have a ladies’ maid for you when you arrive,” Lady Casey retorted. Felicia hated to argue with her mother and had to think of a conclusion to their conversation quickly.

“But Miss Mathews is well aware of the requirements for me when I am to be seen in public. You can instruct her on which gowns I am to bring with me and which ones I shall wear for particular occasions,”

Felicia said, standing.

“That is a splendid idea,” Lady Casey said with a smile. “I shall instruct her immediately.”

Felicia was pleased to see her mother go and turned back to her drawings as she pulled off her apron. She summoned one of the maids to take the work to her room and pack it for her, that she may take it to the countryside. She wanted to show Sierra her latest drawings. She would take all her drawing paper and pencils with her, even if she thought Sierra could provide anything she might want during her stay. She wasn't the type of person to take advantage of someone's wealth. Instead, she would bring her own supplies to keep her busy during her idle time.

By noon, Felicia's things were all packed, her trunks were loaded onto her father's carriage along with Miss Mathews' things, and she had been dressed in her finest travelling clothes. She felt silk was unnecessary but wasn't going to complain since she was being given the freedom to leave Town on such short notice. Miss Mathews was waiting outside with the two footmen and driver while Felicia said her goodbyes to her parents.

“I hope that you will have a lovely time with the duke and duchess,” Lord Casey said. “Make sure that you write to me as soon as you are settled so that I may know you arrived well.”

“I will send my letter back with the carriage and the servants,” Felicia promised.

“Please be on your best behaviour,” Lady Casey said. “Things may be more relaxed in the countryside, but that doesn't mean you should

ever let your guard down. Rumours in the countryside reach Town in just two days by letter.”

“Of course, Mama. I shall not disappoint you,” Felicia said.

“I do hope when you write to me it will be with the news of your engagement,” Lady Casey said with a smile. “I’m sure the duke can vouch for any proposal given to you.”

“I will be sure to let him know that you have given him such permissions,” Felicia said as she curtsied to her parents. “Farewell.”

Her parents said no more as she turned and left the house. With each step away from the townhouse, Felicia felt a sense of freedom washing over her. She was helped into the waiting carriage by a footman, and Miss Mathews soon joined her as she was settling into the vehicle. As soon as the carriage door was shut and secured, she smiled as she looked out the window.

“I am excited about this grand adventure,” Felicia confessed to her ladies’ maid.

“As I am, My Lady. Thank you so much for speaking up for me to come along with you,” Miss Mathews said with a bowed head.

“There is no one else I think would be suited to assist me for whatever Lady Sierra has planned for us,” Felicia said with a sigh, looking out the window as the carriage rumbled down the cobblestone roads of Town.

Felicia was eager to see the familiar sights of London pass away. The noise, the congestion of people, and the steady flow of other carriages and horses, carts and donkeys. In an hour, the carriage had cleared Town's outskirts, where the poorest of the locals lived in small cottages. As the carriage was pulled over one of the main bridges leading into Town, Felicia said her silent farewells to the area, the coach meeting the dirt of the main roads that crossed through the country.

It had been quite some time since Felicia had been to the countryside. Once, when her mother was ill, they had travelled to Bath to enjoy the area's healing waters. Once she recovered, they returned swiftly to Town. It had been in Bath that Felicia had enjoyed long walks amidst the forest surrounding the house they had rented for the time being.

She had felt close to nature as she took in the area's flora and fauna. It had been the squirrels and chipmunks that had scurried all around the trees that brought her joy and laughter. Not the tea parties her mother hosted even though she wasn't well. Lady Casey had certainly worked hard not to let anyone know that she wasn't well.

"My Lady, are you not worried about the bandits and thieves that patrol these highways?" Miss Mathews asked after a while. Felicia was so enthralled with the passing scenery that she had almost not heard her travelling companion.

"No, I dare say that I do not," Felicia admitted, focusing her eyes on her lady's maid. "I trust the men my father has assigned to this carriage. I'm sure at least one of them, if not both, is carrying a pistol."

"I've read terrible stories in the papers," Miss Mathews admitted.

“Fear not,” Felicia said with a smile. “We shall be to the duke’s countryseat in two days and will no doubt have no care in the world.”

“You must be looking forward to a small reprieve from Town,” Miss Mathews said with a smirk. Felicia wondered if her father’s servants knew of the affairs he and his wife kept.

“Yes, Town can be quite overwhelming sometimes. Lady Sierra has promised to introduce me to society in the neighbourhood we’ll be going to. If all goes well, I shall also be married this year,” Felicia said with confidence.

“I do hope that you will be successful,” Miss Mathews said with a smile. “You deserve to marry well, and for love.”

“Why, thank you, Miss Mathews,” Felicia said, knowing that her lady’s maid had always been very kind to her. And no doubt, Miss Mathews wished to obtain a higher position in being her lady’s maid once she was married to either an earl or a duke.

As the day faded away, they stopped in two villages. The first was so Felicia could stretch her legs and enjoy a meal at a local tavern with her footmen following closely to her. The second was so they could rest for the night at an inn. Felicia and Miss Mathews shared adjoining rooms, while the footmen slept in rooms below their level. Felicia had no fears or worries about staying in a public inn because they had stayed at a fine inn with comfortable beds and good food to eat.

Come morning, Felicia was looking forward to seeing her dear friend.

She hoped to arrive at the duke's estate by noon and spend the rest of the day talking with Sierra and learning how she had been faring as a married woman. Felicia sure felt happier than she had in a long time. She was away from her miserable parents and could enjoy the fresh air and pleasant scenery that the country had to offer. She could easily imagine taking long walks in the morning before the heat of the day set in and enjoying the coolness of a sitting room with Sierra in the afternoon.

Felicia was so lost in her thoughts and hopes for the future that the morning seemed to pass away quickly as they travelled by carriage to the duke's home. They didn't make any stops, knowing that she could have a meal as soon as she arrived at the house. She was so excited to arrive and see her dear friend that she didn't dare make any more delays in their travels.

When the duke's large manor came into view as the carriage turned from the main road to the lane, Felicia couldn't help leaning forward and looking out the window. The house appeared to be constructed of many wings and at least two storeys high. It was as magnificent as a palace but more inviting than a castle.

Roman columns framed the front of the manor, while pristinely pruned hedges guarded the front. Felicia was amazed by the number of windows, thinking the manor had to be well lit. It was a beautiful white house and a well-kept landscape. Everything Felicia had dreamed about when coming to the countryside.

Felicia couldn't wait to explore the house and grounds, seeing cleared land as far as she could see, as well as a well-kept garden. She was so excited that she couldn't help smiling widely.



## Chapter 3

Mr Ernest Reed was standing in the front gardens of Lord Roberts' estate as he trimmed the hedges. There had been frequent rain that summer, causing the garden to double in size overnight. There, Ernest had plenty of work to occupy his days as he managed the gardens with a team of a dozen men.

The sound of a carriage rolling along the lane to the front of the manor caught Ernest's attention. He looked up from the hedges and watched as the vehicle came to a stop. As a servant of the duke and duchess, he knew he should have made himself scarce if someone was coming to the house, but Ernest's curiosity always got the better of him. The newly married couple hadn't received any visitors yet, so he was curious to know who had come to the manor.

A young lady stepped down from the carriage once the footmen came to open the door. Ernest's breath was taken away as he looked at the lady. She was dressed in a lovely travelling gown of what looked like light brown satin. She wore a small hat with a white plume feather sticking up from the front. Though she was some distance away in the courtyard in front of the manor, he could see she had very light blonde hair like young straw. It intrigued him greatly.

"Master Reed," called one of his garden attendants. Ernest prised his eyes from the young lady and turned towards the lad approaching him. "I have finished pruning the rose bushes in the east wing of the manor."

"Good," Ernest said with a nod. "I could use some help with these hedges in the front. Had I known that the house was receiving company, I would have finished the work yesterday."

“Ah, yes, I do believe Cook mentioned needing to accommodate for another member of the household,” young Jeffery said as they looked towards the courtyard.

The duchess came quickly out of the house and embraced the young lady, both of them smiling and laughing together. It appeared to Ernest that the young lady must either be a close friend or sister to the duchess. The mistress of the house soon ushered the young lady inside, leaving Ernest even more curious to know her identity. He'd never seen such a beautiful young lady before and was intrigued to learn more about her.

“Alright then, Jeffery. Let's finish trimming these hedges. If the duke and duchess are going to be expecting company, I want the gardens to be tip-top shape for their enjoyment,” Ernest said, focusing on his work once more.

As soon as the front hedges were trimmed back, Ernest left Jeffery to begin working on the hedges on the house's west wing. Curiosity was getting the best of him as he went around the side of the manor. There was a door open to allow a cool breeze into the massive kitchens. Ernest slipped into the door, looking for a small bite to eat and to hear any gossip cook wanted to give him.

“Good afternoon, Ms Penton,” he said as he greeted the cook. “I hear there is a guest in the manor.”

“Word does spread fast,” cook said with a chuckle.

“Well, I did see a young lady myself just arrive. The duchess looked

thrilled to see her,” Ernest admitted as he found a bright red apple and began to munch on it. The sweet taste of the apple was just what he needed as the heat of the day increased. He’d need to bathe by the end of the day if the heat kept up.

“That would be Lady Felicia Casey,” the cook explained. “Mrs Tanner explained that she is a close friend of the duchess’ and is to be afforded the uppermost treatment during her stay for the summer.”

Ernest bit his tongue for a moment, never having a good opinion of the housekeeper, Mrs Tanner. She was a bossy woman who was swift to dish out punishment if she felt one of the servants wasn’t working hard enough. If Ernest himself hadn’t gained the respect of the duke, he was sure he would feel the full brunt of Mrs Tanner’s bad temper more often than not.

“I am sure the duchess is well pleased to have her friend for the summer,” was all Ernest said.

“I shall be cooking a special meal tonight to welcome her to the manor. I do hope she likes peach tarts. Gilbert brought in plenty of peaches from the village upon his return this morning,” cook explained, looking happy to have different fruits to work with.

“Do save me one,” Ernest said with a wink.

“Your handsome looks and charms will get you nowhere in this kitchen,” cook teased as Ernest finished his apple and tossed it in the compost bin.

“A man must use what he is given,” Ernest retorted. “I am dashingly handsome with the physique of a Greek god. Certainly, these characteristics must get me somewhere in life.”

Cook laughed openly then, causing her kitchen maids to join in with her as he had the whole kitchen giggling. Ernest felt his job was done at causing the servants to feel a bit more happiness in life.

As Ernest made his way back into the gardens, he completed his afternoon rounds to ensure that all the work was finished promptly. He let his lads know that there was a guest in the house, that they needed to try to finish everything closest to the house first so that if the family took to the gardens, they would be in tidy condition.

Ernest then turned his attention to one of his favourite parts of the day. He took his clippers from the leather belt on his hip and roamed to the area of rose bushes alongside the house. He enjoyed clipping the different coloured roses from dark red to light yellow to create flower arrangements placed in the many vases around the house in the most used rooms. If cook was preparing a special meal for the new houseguest, then he would ensure that there was a nice flower arrangement on the dining table.

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Felicia was awestruck by the finery of the duke's manor. She had remembered the carefully chosen details of his townhouse, but his countryseat far surpassed that luxury. The floors consisted of white marble that shone her reflection as she walked with Sierra to one of the sitting rooms. Beautiful paintings hung on the dark wooden walls of the hallway, capturing Felicia's attention. There were flower bouquets frequently spotted on long wooden tables in the hallways. Runner rugs of burgundy were laid over the marble floors periodically, feeling plush underneath her feet.

“Such splendid paintings,” Felicia said, stopping to admire one of the paintings that detailed a scene of the sea, with rolling waves upon what looked like the English shore.

“Mr Reed, the master gardener of the estate, is a very talented painter. The duke commissioned him to paint most of the paintings that hang in the estate,” Sierra explained. “He has even painted my likeness that the duke plans to have hung in the drawing room.”

“I very much wish to see it,” Felicia said.

“Don’t worry, my dear. There shall be plenty of time for a tour of the home. But you must be famished and tired from your travels,” Sierra said as she continued to lead her down the hallway towards the sitting room.

“I will admit that I could use a bite to eat. I had the driver continue through instead of stopping for a meal,” Felicia confessed.

“My dear, you shouldn’t have pushed yourself to such extremes,” Sierra admonished.

“I will admit that I was in a rush to arrive. I have looked forward to visiting you since the wedding,” Felicia said honestly.

As they came into the sitting room, Felicia was distracted by the room’s design. The floors were carpeted in a crème colour; bright

yellow papered the walls, and the curtains looked to have been spun from gold as they hung beside the large windows. It was such a beautiful space with all the oak furniture with blue fabric that she could easily imagine herself drawing in this room for hours with the good sunlight.

“I can only guess that you longed to be away from your parents,” Sierra said as she led them over to a mahogany table beside the windows where there were two high back chairs. Felicia sat down in one of the chairs, thinking the navy blue fabric pinned to the chair was very soft and inviting.

“Their bickering never stops, and the sounds with their lovers always turns my stomach,” Felicia said, having always confessed all she knew about her parents to her dearest friend, knowing Sierra would always be her dearest confidante.

“Then I am glad they allowed you to stay for the entire summer. Once you are well-rested, I shall invite the other women of the neighbourhood to have tea with us. I wish you to know all the good families here. Many eligible lords are staying in the countryside for their summer months as well,” Sierra announced.

“You are taking your role as matchmaker very seriously,” Felicia said with a smile.

“Felicia, I can hardly express in the right words just how happy I have been since I married. I wish for you to have this same happiness as well,” Sierra said, a bright smile on her face. Felicia could tell that her dear friend was very much still in love.

“Then I can only hope that I shall find a man to fall in love with just

as yourself,” Felicia said as a maid brought in a tea tray and set it on the table between herself and Sierra.

“Miss, would you ensure that Lady Felicia’s servants are well fed as well? They have not stopped since breakfast and are sure to be famished,” Sierra said, addressing the maid.

“Certainly, Your Grace,” the maid said with a curtsy before hurrying off to see that the duchess’ request was fulfilled.

“What it must be to have charge over an entire household of servants,” Felicia said with a smirk.

“I will admit that it has been rather nice to be the mistress of an entire household this size,” Sierra said with a chuckle. “I have felt such freedom since being married that, sometimes, I hardly know what to do with myself. But now that you are here, we shall be quite busy.”

“Are you saying that you haven’t been quite busy with your husband since being married?” Felicia teased as she took her teacup and sipped the lavender tea. The tea tray included many small sandwiches that Felicia was looking forward to eating.

“A married woman doesn’t share such details,” Sierra retorted as she blushed deeply. She leaned forward and collected her own teacup as Felicia chuckled.

“It is good to see you this happy,” Felicia commented. “As long as you are forever happy, I shall not grieve over losing you to another man.”

“And as soon as I find you a husband, then you shall forget all about me as he falls madly in love,” Sierra replied, teasing Felicia in return.

“Then it is a deal,” Felicia said as she picked up a small sandwich and took a bite. “I shall fall in love with a man at my earliest convenience and forget all about my sorrow.”

The young ladies laughed together for the rest of the afternoon as they enjoyed the splendour of the tea tray. As soon as they were done eating, Miss Mathews was summoned to the room to show Felicia to her bedchamber so she could change into something more comfortable. Sierra wished to show her around the house and the grounds further on. Felicia was looking forward to a good walk and did her best to be changed quickly.

“My Lady, this is the largest house I have ever been in,” Miss Mathews admitted, doing her best to remember the instructions the housekeeper had given her. “It is a small adventure just to make it to your bedchamber.”

“This house is so magnificent that I shall spend days roaming the halls just to take in all the décor. The flower arrangements alone are gorgeous,” Felicia commented as they passed by a buffet table of vases at the top of the grand staircase. Miss Mathews then led her down the hallway towards the east wing.

“There is certainly a lot to take in,” Miss Mathews agreed.

“Are you finding the servants’ quarters to be acceptable? Did you get to eat before coming to fetch me?” Felicia asked, wanting to be certain



her lady's maid was being well taken care of.

"Yes, My Lady. Mrs Tanner is the housekeeper of this estate and was quick to make sure I and the others did eat. The footmen and your father's driver will soon be heading back to Town," Miss Mathews explained.

"Then I must write a letter quickly for my father so he knows I arrived in good health," Felicia stated as they arrived at her bedchamber. It felt like three rooms combined into one as she entered the space. There was a sitting arrangement before a large fireplace, a large four-poster bed against the far left wall, and through another door, she could see a changing room.

Miss Mathews pointed Felicia in the direction of the fully stocked writing desk. While Felicia sat to write a letter to her father, Miss Mathews went to the wardrobe that already housed all of Felicia's clothes and collected a linen day gown that Felicia would be comfortable in for the day. She wrote a few lines to her father, stating she had arrived and was well before she quickly dried the ink with her breath and sealed it with wax and the duke's seal.

As soon as Felicia was changed, feeling refreshed in the lighter clothes, she gave the letter to her lady's maid and instructed it was to be given to her father's footmen to be delivered upon their return to Town. With her walking boots on, she then followed the maid back downstairs to the sitting room where Sierra waited.

"I am ready for my tour of the castle," Felicia said as she entered the room once more.

Sierra laughed as she stood to her feet. "I suppose it does feel like a

castle. Only it is so finely done and warm,” Sierra said coming towards Felicia.

“Are you the one I should give credit to for the design of the house?” Felicia asked, walking beside Sierra as they left the sitting room.

“I must confess that my dear husband has good taste,” Sierra said. “I have made very little changes upon arriving.”

“I pray that I may marry a man with such good tastes,” Felicia said with a sigh. “I do lack such vision, unlike my mother.”

“Think no more of your parents while you are here,” Sierra advised. “I shall be your guardian and will guide you.”

“You are truly the best of friends,” Felicia said, feeling such relief of being with her childhood friend once more.

“As well as you are,” Sierra replied.

The duchess took Felicia on a grand tour of the house. She was able to see the drawing room, parlour for the gentlemen, the duke’s study, a large library that completely captivated Felicia, and ballroom Sierra hoped to plan a ball for soon, and a dining room that could easily seat fifty people.

“There is a music room as well that Mr Reed mostly uses,” Sierra said as she led Felicia into that large room. There were so many windows

that Felicia felt as though she was stepping outside. A pair of French doors led to a small patio and then out to the gardens. Felicia saw for herself several tables set up in front of the windows with what looked to be painting supplies. In the room was also a pianoforte, a harp, and a table of violins of different types.

“It appears the gardener uses this room for his paintings,” Felicia observed.

“Lord Roberts hopes that our children will find use of this room once they grow of age to take an interest in music. But till that day, Mr Reed uses it for his paintings that the duke commissions,” Sierra explained.

“How darling that you are already thinking of children,” Felicia teased.

“Children are a very realistic expectation of mine,” Sierra confessed as she blushed deeply once more. Felicia just smiled as she shook her head, looking down at the paintings the gardener was working on. They were so breathtaking that she couldn’t help reaching her hand out and touching a dried painting as she trailed her fingers along it. The painting was of a large oak tree that had fall leaves.

“I know how much you are fond of art,” Sierra said softly. “I am sure if I asked Mr Reed, he could be a good tutor for you. You could learn to paint during your time here.”

“You really think so?” Felicia asked. She withdrew her fingers from the magnificent painting as she turned.

“Mr Reed is a kind man, one of my husband’s favourite staff members. I can show you the gardens and enquire of Mr Reed’s services,” Sierra offered.

“I wouldn’t want to take away from his other duties,” Felicia confessed.

“The master gardener has a staff of over a dozen workers. I doubt he will be missed for a few hours in the day on occasion,” Sierra assured. “Come, let us find him now while I show you the gardens.”

Felicia hurriedly agreed, thinking if anything else, she would get to enjoy the sunshine on her face and the beautiful gardens she had spotted earlier upon her arrival at the massive estate.

## Chapter 4

Ernest had just given his flower arrangements over to a few of the maids in the servants' quarters when he headed back outside to the gardens. There, he spotted the duchess and her friend strolling through the rose bushes. Ernest swallowed hard as he took in the beauty of the houseguest.

She was a bit closer this time, and he could see that her hair shone like gold in the sunlight. He couldn't help wondering how it would feel in his hands. Ernest speedily pushed those thoughts aside as he quickly wiped his face with the cleaning cloth on his leather belt before approaching the duchess.

"Good afternoon, Your Grace," Ernest said as he approached the ladies and bowed. "Please let me know if I may be of assistance to you during your stroll through the gardens."

"Thank you, Mr Reed. In fact, I wish to introduce you to my dearest friend, Lady Felicia," the duchess explained. "She is very fond of drawing and would be interested in learning how to paint. I'm confident that the duke would approve."

Ernest was surprised by such a request. One minute he was hoping to learn more about the new visitor to the estate, the next he was already being offered such an opportunity. He was flabbergasted for a moment and had to quickly regain his senses.

"I am at your disposal, Your Grace," Ernest said with a bow. "I would be pleased to tutor Lady Felicia on all I know about painting." He slowly righted himself, peeking at the young lady. He saw close up

that she had the most dazzling hazel eyes that were a perfect blue and green mix. There were flecks of gold throughout that made him feel as if he could stare into her eyes forever and never become bored.

“I will speak with Lord Roberts this evening at dinner to confirm his agreement to the arrangement,” the duchess said, turning to her friend. “You will be able to begin your lessons as soon as you are rested from your travels.”

“Thank you,” Lady Felicia said with a smile. “I will find great pleasure in learning to paint.”

“Does the lady already enjoy producing art?” Ernest asked, his body tingling at the idea of providing the lady pleasure.

“I am quite fond of drawing,” Lady Felicia said. “I could spend the entire day drawing by sunlight and have done so on occasion in the past.”

“Drawing is certainly a beginning stage to painting,” Ernest said. “I would be honoured to review your drawings to help you turn them into paintings.”

“It will be nice to receive lessons on the subject,” Lady Felicia replied, a kind smile on her face. Ernest considered him to be very fortunate. He was merely a gardener, yet a woman of status considered him to be a tutor. Ernest knew how grateful he should be.

“Good day, Mr Reed,” the duchess said then, leading Lady Felicia further into the gardens. Ernest bowed as the ladies walked on. But as

he straightened himself once more, he couldn't help following Lady Felicia with his eyes. She was such a beauty that he could hardly keep his eyes off her.

Swallowing hard, Ernest made his way through the garden, letting his workers know that the duchess was present and to stay out of her way unless she required assistance. He made sure that the masters always had privacy in the gardens, even though the staff was always well aware of where the couple was and what they were doing. Ernest chuckled, remembering the time he had shown all the gardeners to the other wing of the garden as the duke made love to his wife amongst the rose bushes. One thing for certain was that his master had married for love.

Ernest sometimes wished he could settle down with a maiden of his own. He'd worked for the duke since he was sixteen and recommended by his father, who had been the master gardener before him. When his father passed away five years ago, Ernest took over from him and did his best to live up to his father's memory and strong work ethic.

One afternoon, Ernest was painting in the garden after completing the day's work when the duke happened upon him. Ernest thought for sure he would be let go, having spent his free time painting on the duke's lands instead of remaining in the servants' quarters. But the duke had reassured him that Ernest had done nothing wrong. In fact, the duke had then commissioned Ernest to paint many pieces for the manor.

Ernest certainly had hopes for his future when it came to his artwork. He knew of the Royal gallery in London that housed some of the best paintings from England's rising artists. He knew that if he could get one of his paintings in that gallery and have it displayed on the top of the three rows of paintings, he would certainly be able to become a full-time commissioned painter in Town.

For now, however, he needed to save his money so one day he could go to Town to make his dream come true. It seemed as well that he needed to change his focus on tutoring in addition to his other duties. Ernest couldn't complain, thinking how beautiful Lady Felicia was. He would enjoy the lessons just as much as the young lady would as he gazed upon her beauty and thought of all the different ways he could paint her to create a masterpiece.

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Felicia was truly enjoying her tour of the estate and the vast grounds. Sierra had shown her around the gardens, but she spotted several riding trails she would surely like to explore in the future and a large hill in the distance she thought would be a perfect spot to view all the surrounding land. Being outside had been such a relaxing experience for Felicia that, by the time they went back inside for a refreshing drink of cooled mint tea, she was starting to yawn.

"Felicia, you should rest till dinner is announced," Sierra suggested as they sipped their cooled tea in the sitting room.

"Now that I am here, I feel I don't want to waste a minute of it. I look forward to exploring the library more thoroughly, or the grounds of the estate," Felicia admitted.

"You won't enjoy your experience unless you are well-rested," Sierra said. "And be sure to keep your lady's maid by your side. The house can be quite large, and I'd hate you to get lost in it."

"Don't worry about that," Felicia said with a smile. "It would be an



adventure to get lost in such a large house.”

“Alright, then. I shall summon your lady’s maid, and you shall take a rest before dinner,” Sierra said.

Felicia nodded as she sipped her tea, discerning a small rest wouldn’t hurt her. She looked out the tall windows and out into the garden, thinking it was one of the most splendid gardens she had ever seen besides the Royal gardens themselves. She understood that the duke was very wealthy, but it was certain that he had also hired very talented gardeners as well. The smell of the rose bushes had been so fragrant that she could see herself easily spending time amongst the flowers while they were still in bloom.

When Miss Mathews arrived in the sitting room, Felicia followed her lady’s maid through the house to her appointed bedchamber. She walked slowly, taking in all the house’s details from the marble floors to the windows that let in all sorts of sunlight. There were several paintings on the wall of landscapes, and Felicia wondered if Mr Reed had painted them all. She thought back to her thoughts concerning the man as Sierra had made the introductions and requested his services for her benefit.

Though Felicia knew it was not proper, she could not help thinking that Mr Reed was very dashing. He was taller than her with dark brown hair and dazzling blue eyes that shone in the sunlight. His skin was tanned from hours working under the sun, and his physique was very muscular. He reminded her of sculptures she had seen at the museum in Town during a charity gala of ancient Roman warriors with toned muscles from head to toe.

“My Lady, are you quite well?” Miss Mathews asked as they arrived at her bedchamber.

“Yes, why do you ask?” Felicia said, looking towards her lady’s maid.

“Your cheeks are quite red,” Miss Mathews stated, clearly concerned.

“I’m just a bit warm for all the walking I’ve done today,” Felicia said with a chuckle, trying to brush off the fact that she had been blushing while she thought of Mr Reed. He might have been dressed in simple trousers and just a muslin shirt because of his status, but she still thought of him as extremely handsome.

“I will pull the curtains over the windows so it is cooler in your room,” Miss Mathews offered. Felicia went to her bedside table and poured herself a glass of water from the pitcher and cup resting there. She sipped from it as she tried to cool her body and clear her mind of those particular thoughts. Felicia knew thinking of a servant in such a way was scandalous and that she needed to avoid doing so in the future.

Once the heavy burgundy curtains were pulled shut over the many windows, Miss Mathews helped Felicia out of her day gown to rest in just her chemise to be much cooler. Felicia looked around the room as she moved towards the bed, enjoying the feeling of the cream coloured carpet beneath her bare feet.

“Is there anything else I can do for you, my lady?” Miss Mathews asked as she moved towards the bedchamber door.

“No, Miss Mathews. Thank you for your assistance. I hope you can get some rest as well,” Felicia added.

“I will do my best, my lady,” Miss Mathews said with a curtsy before leaving the room and shutting the door behind her.

As Felicia laid down on the bed, she looked up at the crown moulding on the ceiling and how it had been formed into intricate designs that reminded her of the leaves of the rose bushes in the garden. She sighed as she took in all the fine details of her bedchamber, thinking how wealthy her dear friend now was. She lived in such a fine house, far away from the prying eyes of society, and no longer had to worry about her parents. Sierra was in love and would always have everything she could ever desire.

Though she knew her friend had a great position within society now, Felicia didn't want status or fortune. She wanted nothing to do with high society that so obsessed her parents. All she wanted was a peaceful lifestyle where she was married to a man she loved who would not turn his nose up at her love for art and nature.

As Felicia closed her eyes to get a bit of rest, she imagined what her perfect husband would be like. He would be charming, that was for sure. Felicia wanted romance in her life and someone who was willing to woo her. She wanted to be pursued and have her heart won over.

Next, her husband would look very handsome. She imagined a man a bit taller than her so she could gaze into his eyes, or she would need to push herself up onto her tiptoes to kiss him passionately. She would run her fingers through his hair as he returned her affections as well. No doubt, such a loving relationship would produce many children. The thought made Felicia giggle as she tried to rest.

Felicia dreamed of being married to a man that she could love, one who would be interested in her drawings and paintings once she

learned how to produce such designs. Her husband would be proud, encouraging her instead of trying to tell her that her hobby was pointless or a waste of time. Her father had told her that once and she feared that one day her husband might say the same when the romance died down.

If anything, Felicia knew she would never tire of nature. She wanted to live in a house in the countryside always to enjoy the view of nature, the sounds and sights, and always have something nice to draw. Though there were nice parks in Town, they didn't compare to untamed nature that was more wild and natural than cultivated gardens only frequented by birds.

As Felicia dreamed about her future and the gentlemen Sierra was sure to introduce her to throughout the summer months, she tried to picture that man she was dreaming of in detail. She couldn't help imagining Mr Reed as she daydreamed, laying down on the plush pillows of the large bed as she closed her eyes. He certainly was a dashing man. If only he were an earl or duke instead of a gardener.

Felicia wasn't sure for how long she had slept, but when Miss Mathews came back to her bedchamber to raise her for dinner, she could tell that quite some time had passed. Miss Mathews pulled back the burgundy curtains over the windows to show that the sun was setting in the distance, casting orange and pink into the sky. Felicia hoped that she would be able to capture such colours in paint one day when she started her lessons with Mr Reed.

"How was your rest, My Lady?" Miss Mathews asked as Felicia stood out of bed and stretched.

"It was well-needed after all," Felicia said with a yawn. "Thank you for rousing me, or I would have slept till tomorrow."

"I'm sure the duchess would not mind if you took your dinner in your room. I could bring you a tray if you like?" Miss Mathews suggested.

"No, I wish to go down to dine with the couple and greet the duke," Felicia replied.

Miss Mathews had Felicia dressed in a lovely light blue gown with a white lace hem that was elegant but not too extravagant for just dinner. Felicia's hair was brushed and braided down her back like cords of gold. In a matter of no time, Miss Mathews was leading Felicia back through the grand house, shadows being cast everywhere from the setting sun.

"I'll return to lead you back to your room after dinner," Miss Mathews said with a curtsy right before Felicia entered the large dining room.

Felicia entered the room and saw that Sierra and her husband were already seated at the table. She hurried to be seated as well, hoping she hadn't kept the two of them waiting.

"Good evening, Your Grace," Felicia said as she curtsied before the duke before being seated by the footman next to Sierra.

"Good evening, Lady Felicia. I hope you had good travels," Lord Roberts said in greeting.

"Very well, thank you," Felicia replied, reminding herself to keep high manners with such a wealthy and powerful man.

“My darling wife tells me that you have a high interest in painting and has enlisted one of my favourite staff members to tutor you,” Lord Roberts said as the first course of the meal was served. It was a light bone broth with thinly sliced mushrooms.

“Yes, Your Grace,” Felicia replied, wondering how the duke felt about such an interest.

“Mr Reed is a fine painter, as you can tell by the many paintings in the house. He will certainly be a good tutor for you,” the duke said with a smile. “You never know. Perhaps one day, one of your paintings will hang in the Royal gallery.”

Felicia chuckled as she shook her head. “I don’t know if I will ever paint such a fine piece, nor do I believe the Prince Regent will allow a female artist to be displayed in his halls,” Felicia reasoned.

“I look forward to what you can create during your time with us,” Sierra said. “I’ve seen many of your drawings before, and they are quite lovely.”

“Such a talent must be an attraction to other young men,” the duke said with a chuckle.

“That gives me such a splendid idea,” Sierra exclaimed as she set down her soup spoon. “You shall create a few fine drawings and at least one painting, and then we shall have a viewing here at the house. It will be sure to be a fun event, especially if we invite other young ladies to participate.”

“As a lover of art, I think that is a wonderful idea, my love,” the duke was quick to agree.

“That is quite an idea,” Felicia admitted. “I know for sure that I would be nervous for people to see my work, but it would be an enjoyable experience nonetheless.”

“Then it is settled. Felicia, we shall meet Mr Reed tomorrow to go over the event so that he can prepare you. Then, by displaying your art for our little society to see, you’ll no doubt attract a very fine husband,” Sierra said with a smile.

For the rest of the evening, the three of them spoke about the details of such a fun event. Felicia had never been involved in planning a social event, her parents always bickering over the plans when they chose to host a dinner party at the house. Felicia was actually enjoying herself as she spoke with the duke and duchess, thinking that her time in the countryside would be the best summer in her life.

## Chapter 5

“Reed, the duchess is requesting your presence in the music room,” called one of the older footmen as he came out into the garden.

“Thank you, Daniel. I’ll be right there,” Ernest said as he quickly pocketed his clippers in his leather pouch that hung on his belt. Then he grabbed his cloth and wiped his hands and face before he made his way into the house. He certainly wanted to look his best before he approached the mistress of the house.

As Ernest stepped into the music room, he saw that the duchess was not alone. Lady Felicia was with her and one other maid that Ernest had never seen before. He could only assume that she was Lady Felicia’s personal maid.

“Your Grace,” Ernest said as he came into the room from the double doors opened to the gardens outside. He approached the mistress and bowed before straightening his posture.

“Thank you for coming so soon, Mr Reed. We have much to discuss,” Lady Roberts said excitedly. “We have decided on hosting a public gallery here at the manor. The intention is to display Lady Felicia’s artwork in hopes of attracting a suitor for her.” Ernest glanced at Lady Felicia and saw the way she blushed at such an explanation.

“I request your assistance in aiding Lady Felicia in finishing at least one painting in a fortnight so that we can display it in the gallery,” the duchess explained.



“Of course, Your Grace. I am honoured to assist,” Ernest said, wondering if he could realistically help Lady Felicia finish a painting in such a short time. It would depend on her level of skill and time she decided to commit to the painting. He could only assume that such a pretty socialite would not be interested in spending very long on something that required much time.

“Miss Mathews, please have my drawings retrieved from my possessions,” Lady Felicia said, turning to the maid. The lady’s maid curtsied before hurrying off to see the request fulfilled.

“I am going to invite families from the neighbourhood to participate. The ballroom shall be transformed into a gallery that will display all sorts of artwork from young ladies and men alike,” the duchess explained.

“A wonderful idea, Your Grace,” Ernest said as he dipped his head.

The Duchess continued with her thoughts about the gallery, the details that she wanted to include. All the while, Ernest kept peeking at Lady Felicia, noticing the way she gravitated towards the large mahogany table that Ernest used for his own paintings in the late evenings, working by the setting sun and candlelight to finish the latest piece he’d been commissioned to make for the duke.

He couldn’t help seeing how beautiful Lady Felicia was in the morning light, thinking that he’d like to capture the colour of her hair with his paints and transform her likeness into perhaps a field of wheat ready to be harvested. He couldn’t help wondering if the rest of her hair was the same fine golden blonde, but those thoughts he quickly pushed away as he focused back on the duchess.

“I believe you will host a wonderful gallery,” Ernest said with a dip of his head. “You are very thoughtful, Your Grace, and Lady Felicia will surely benefit from such an event.”

“That is surely the intent of such an event,” Lady Roberts said with a grand smile. “I wish my dearest friend to share in my happiness of being married one day.”

Ernest just nodded, not wanting to comment on the known happiness between the duke and his wife. He wouldn't want to embarrass the mistress.

When the maid returned with Lady Felicia's drawings, the young lady accepted them before setting them out in the spare room on the large table. Ernest stepped forward, observing the drawings and expecting they wouldn't be very good. He simply figured Lady Felicia was just another beautiful lady who had an interest in drawing and painting but no real talent.

Ernest's breath was taken away as he looked down at the graphite drawings. Lady Felicia had not only captured the likeness of a bird that appeared to be resting on a tree branch, but she had effectively shaded the bird to make it look lifelike. He was so surprised by the detail and skill that Lady Felicia possessed that he was silent for a few moments.

“I hope the drawings are to your liking,” Lady Felicia spoke up. “I am hoping to turn one of them into a painting.”

“Yes, My Lady. Forgive me. I believe that your drawings are quite excellent and found myself dumbstruck for a moment,” Ernest said,

bowing his head to Lady Felicia. "I do believe any of these drawings would be fitting for a painting. Do choose your favourite amongst these, and I shall help you paint it."

"Very good," Lady Roberts said, clapping her hands. "I shall leave you two to the work while I begin on the preparations."

Ernest bowed to the duchess as she made her way out of the music room. Then, he turned his attention back to Lady Felicia as her lady's maid took to a chair near the piano. Ernest knew there would be ever watchful eyes and that he needed to really watch himself around such beauty.

"I would like to paint this drawing I did of the pond at the back of my father's townhouse," Lady Felicia said, lifting the long sheet of drawing paper from the small stack. "I took my paper and graphite pencil out to the veranda one morning as the sun was rising. The reflection off the water was very beautiful like the water was a mirror for the sky."

"Yes, water can be used to reflect the scenery around it," Ernest agreed. "I have painted a handful of lakes, rivers, and even the ocean once. It needs to be shaded just right to show not only the shadows of the sun but the landscape around it." He pointed to how Lady Felicia had constructed her shading based on the rising of the sun behind the trees that framed the small pond.

"I've been practicing drawing ever since I knew that it was possible," Lady Felicia admitted. "My father said that I would often scribble with graphite when I was younger before I could even speak clearly. I have not received any instruction because my mother believed that art was not suitable for a future countess. Therefore, my ability to draw was only from frequent practice."

“You have done excellently at capturing the likeness of what we can see in nature. Painting is very much the same thing, but now you have to deal with colour, the texture of the paint compared to graphite, and how to apply the paint with a horsehair brush instead of the wood of a pencil,” Ernest explained.

Ernest began his lecture on paints as he showed Lady Felicia the tools he used for constructing his paintings on large pieces of canvas material that soaked up the paint nicely. He let Lady Felicia handle each of his paintbrushes, feeling the horsehair at the end with her fingertips. She was so gentle that he couldn't help thinking if given other things to handle if she would be just as gentle. Ernest couldn't help blushing as he turned his eyes to the paints.

“Now, one of the most difficult aspects of painting is getting the colour just right. You can mix two or three colours together to get the precise colour you need. That is how you can bring a painting to life with realism. That, and layering the paints to make the painting look as though you are looking through a window instead of just a painting,” Ernest said, speaking slowly to make sure Lady Felicia understood what he was saying.

“I have always wondered how painters capture the exact colour of the sky or the green grass in the summer,” Lady Felicia said with a smile, leaning towards the small amber jars of paint. She picked one up to examine the contents, looking honestly interested in his work.

“Practice, as you may very well be aware, Lady Felicia. It will take some time to learn the art of painting, and I will do my best to prepare you within a fortnight,” Ernest said humbly.

“I am not worried about the condition of the painting come the grand

gallery event,” Lady Felicia said with a sigh. Ernest watched her closely, trying to gauge her reaction.

“You don’t seem as enthusiastic about the duchess’ event,” Ernest observed.

Lady Felicia nodded as she turned her eyes on Ernest. He couldn’t believe how gorgeous her hazel eyes were and kept reminding himself that he needed to behave while they were together. He would need to distract himself from falling into the depths of her eyes and never be able to pull himself out.

“I am grateful for the duchess’ kindness for what she is willing to do for me. But I am worried that any eligible gentleman for myself won’t be acceptable of my love for art,” Lady Felicia confessed. Ernest was surprised by how honest she was with him. He wondered if she were the type of elite young lady who didn’t turn her nose up to servants. The duke and duchess were certainly not that type, and this young lady before him seemed to be similar in perspective towards servants.

“The duke and duchess have been a wonderful example of what it is like to marry for love. Therefore, as long as you marry for love, then you shall not worry about such things,” Ernest advised, trying to be helpful.

“You’re right,” Lady Felicia said with a nod. “Let’s get started on transforming this drawing.”

For what seemed hours, Ernest taught Lady Felicia all the basics about painting. They went over every tool, which brush was best for each type of painting, and the best ways to make a painting come alive. Lady Felicia described what the colours would be like for her painting,

and Ernest was impressed with her ability to describe her painting.

“The pond in the garden is murky, no matter what the garden tries to do. Fish don’t survive in the water, so it is no longer stocked. Yet, in the mornings and afternoons, the sunlight hits the water and causes it to become alive,” Lady Felicia explained.

“Murky, dark water that can reflect the brightness of the sun,” Ernest said with a nod. “This is a good balance of colours, of the dark and the light. What does this painting represent to you?”

“What do you mean?” Lady Felicia asked, looking up at him from where she was leaning over the table, pointing out her drawing’s different aspects.

“We draw what is before us in order to perfect our craft. However, there is a reason we pick one or another thing to recreate in these mediums. I paint landscapes because I want people in future generations to look back and see what my surroundings looked like and how I recreated these sceneries from my perspective. For you, why did you choose to draw the pond during this point of the day?” Ernest explained.

“It was the only part of the day when the pond looked beautiful,” Lady Felicia said. “It reminded me of times in my life when I don’t feel beautiful, like when I am attending a ball, and there is such finery around me in other young ladies’ gowns. But, with the pond, it only takes a certain light to make it beautiful. I am still trying to find that light to shine in.”

Ernest was certainly shocked to hear this. Lady Felicia was one of the most beautiful women he’d ever laid eyes on. He wanted to tell the

young lady such but knew that it would be quite inappropriate. Therefore, he quickly changed the line of conversation.

“There is deeper meaning to why people draw and paint certain things. There is beauty in such things but also something that draws them personally to that subject they wish to recreate into a painting. As you paint, remember what drew you to this pond and why you sketched it. Let that meaning guide your brush strokes and the colours you use,” Ernest said.

Miss Mathews went to fetch a tea tray when afternoon came and went. They had not taken any breaks, and to Ernest, it didn't look like Lady Felicia wanted to rest from his lecture. She was completely enthralled with what he was teaching her, and Ernest thought it quite nice to have such an eager student. With the doors opened to the garden, it was certainly a relaxing atmosphere in the music room.

“To begin, we will construct the background of the painting and build forward, layer upon layer. On like drawing, you normally start with a rough sketch and then move side to side to add the detail with shading, shadows, and highlights,” Ernest said. “With painting, we will mix the colours for the background and apply it first. Once it is dry, I will then show you how to build each layer.”

“Will most of the sketch become covered if we do that?” Lady Felicia asked.

“That is true,” Ernest said with a nod, liking how the young lady was already predicting the process. “Your drawing will be an outline for the painting. But the detail you'll have to recreate. If you wish to study the drawing before we begin, we can mix paints tomorrow.”

“No, I wish to proceed immediately,” Lady Felicia said with a smile. “I dear to know how it feels to hold the paintbrush in my hand and the texture of the paint as I apply the strokes.”

Ernest turned his head as he blushed, trying to pretend he was sorting through his paints. He couldn't help thinking what else he'd like Lady Felicia to hold for the first time concerning stroke. No woman had ever caused his body to react in such a way, and he kept forcing himself to clear his mind.

Thankfully, Miss Mathews returned with a tea tray, forcing Lady Felicia to take a break. Ernest folded his hands behind his back and held onto them as he examined the woman's drawing. He was already formulating in his mind the process he would guide Lady Felicia through to create the painting she had in mind. He'd never tutored anyone in painting before and thought the only way to move forward would be to guide the lady through his own process.

“Would you care for a cup of tea?” Lady Felicia asked, capturing his attention. Ernest turned to see that Miss Mathews was sitting with the lady at a small table by the open doors, enjoying a cup of tea herself. Ernest had never seen a proper lady take tea with a servant before and wasn't sure how to respond.

“Thank you, My Lady ... but I don't think it would be proper,” Ernest said, bowing his head.

Her response was to laugh. Such a musical sound would keep him captivated for all time.

“Come now, Mr Reed. It is only tea and tarts. Miss Mathews here will vouch for your good manners,” Lady Felicia insisted. Ernest let his



eyes drift to the lady's maid, and she smiled in return. Then, when she nodded, Ernest approached and took a seat at the table. He served himself a cup of tea and pulled a porcelain plate from the tray to rest his tea and tarts on. He felt so out of place that all he could do was look down at his tea to show his utmost respect.

"Where did you learn to paint?" Lady Felicia asked, forcing him to look up and acknowledge the lady.

"I simply took an interest in painting, and since my father was very indulging, as long as I learned how to keep the gardens of the estate, he would buy me paints, brushes, and canvas to practice my love for art," Ernest explained.

"Then it seems that we both began from humble beginnings with our craft in art," Lady Felicia said with a smile.

"I suppose you could say so," Ernest said, nodding. "Men of my station don't receive much education besides simple reading and writing. Therefore, I believe my mind is more open to art since it is not clouded with so many other things." This made the women laugh, helping Ernest to relax some in their presence.

"Very well said, Mr Reed. I have been forced to study many things by my mother, but drawing has been my only passion in life. Therefore, I focused on it the most to help me with the difficulties of my home life," Lady Felicia explained.

Ernest was curious to understand what could be so difficult for a woman that had been born into a wealthy family. However, it was not his place to ask such questions of a lady, and certainly not in front of her lady's maid.

“Art is a wonderful thing that is available to anyone. I hope to add to your pleasure with painting,” Ernest said before he realized what words he had released. He couldn’t help his blush as he returned his eyes to his tea, taking a long sip. He certainly hoped Lady Felicia hadn’t taken his words the wrong way, despite what his body felt towards her.

## Chapter 6

Felicia felt as though she'd died and gone to heaven. Staying at the duke's home was turning out to be one of the best things she ever did. No longer was she plagued by her parents' constant bickering or having to be stuck in uncomfortable situations between the two of them. She felt a sense of freedom she hadn't known in such a long time that she wondered if she'd ever felt this free in her life before.

In the mornings, Felicia would wake when she was ready, not as early as she could, just to have some peace and quiet before her parents woke. Now she was free to rise and fall asleep when she wanted to instead of being forced to change her daily habits based on other people's actions in the house.

Being reunited with Sierra brought Felicia so much happiness. She loved spending time with her friend during the day as they discussed the plans for the gallery event. Though she wasn't keen about social gatherings, she thought that perhaps this gallery event would be different. Her parents weren't the ones that would be planning the event, and she wouldn't be forced to do anything she didn't want. Sitting with Sierra and planning all the details was actually enjoyable for once because her friend truly wanted to know her opinion.

"With it being summer, I don't believe any brandy or sherry should be served as in the spring and winter," Sierra had said as they sat together in the sitting room, the housekeeper, Mrs Tanner joining them to document all the details under discussion.

Felicia had learned that Mrs Tanner was a very traditional woman, running a very tight schedule for the household. At least, that was what Miss Mathews had told her. Miss Mathews had reported that Mrs Tanner wasn't the kindest of women, and perhaps it had been her old

age that set her into her place. Mrs Tanner was a tall woman with grey hair that she always had pulled back into a tight bun. She wore a black gown that only made her features look harsh. Her hooked nose and beady eyes did not help her figure at all.

“Lemonade, mint tea, and cucumber water would all be good choices for a refreshing beverage,” Felicia replied. “With little sandwiches with pickled radishes and strawberry tarts, I think everyone would love such a refreshing menu.”

“Oh, that is such a wonderful idea. Mrs Tanner, please write that down,” Sierra had said with a bright smile.

“Yes, Your Grace,” Mrs Tanner replied, her voice always so grim and low. Felicia didn’t particularly care for the housekeeper, but the woman had been working for the family since the duke was an infant.

After Sierra and Felicia visited in the morning after breakfast, she went to the music room to meet Mr Reed. She’d taken a quick liking to the master gardener and thought that his instructions on how to use paint were easy to follow. He was always very kind and attentive.

The only difficulty that arose from working with Mr Reed was that Felicia couldn’t help noticing how attractive the man was. He was unlike any other man she’d been introduced to before. He was tall, his skin tanned from the sun, and his blue eyes were absolutely dazzling like clear blue water. She could look into the depths of his eyes and never grow tired of trying to pinpoint the exact colour of his eyes with the paints that she now had access to.

The duke was certainly a generous man and had asked for new paints and canvas for Felicia to use for her lessons. Her parents were never

keen in providing her supplies, yet Miss Mathews was always kind to collect what she needed with a bit of the money Felicia had as a monthly allowance from her father. Therefore, she was never without any supplies.

“I don’t think I’ll ever know how to repay the duke’s kindness,” Felicia had said to Mr Reed while they had worked together. Miss Mathews was always present, being a watchful eye, but also someone to converse with when Felicia wanted another opinion on the progress of her painting.

“His Grace has been rather kind to me as well,” Mr Reed had admitted. “He permits my love for passion because I feel as though we share that same passion for the creation of art. I believe that the gallery event will be a big success.”

“I sure hope it will,” Felicia said as she sat at the large mahogany table and leaned over her painting.

As instructed, she had begun creating the background colour for the painting as Mr Reed taught her how to mix paints. Sometimes she would blush when their hands collided, or Mr Reed took her hand with a brush between her fingers to learn how to complete certain strokes with the brush. She was certainly getting used to the feeling of the paint on her brush and how she applied it. And, she was also getting used to being around Mr Reed.

“The background colours are always dark in nature because you will be applying so many different colours on top of them to create texture, dimension, and realism with the paints,” Mr Reed explained when Felicia began to worry that the blue for the sky she had mixed turned out too dark in her opinion. Felicia liked how Mr Reed was always encouraging, as though she could never do any wrong.

Felicia relished in the fact that for the first time in her life, she wasn't been scolded for her love for art, or wasn't afraid to speak about her painting with others. Mr Reed was very receptive to her opinions and perspectives of drawing and painting, and was quick to entertain her thoughts instead of turning up his nose at her for having foolish ideas. Felicia had never had such encouragement in her life that she hoped that by the end of summer she would be married to a man like Mr Reed who would always encourage her.

Felicia knew that Sierra was planning all sorts of events so that she could meet the perfect man for her. A week after coming to the countryside, Felicia attended a tea party in the drawing room with some of the most prominent women in the neighbourhood. It was Felicia's time to shine to make a good impression on mothers and sisters of gentlemen eligible to marry.

"Your mother is such a wonderful influence on society," Miss Beverly had told Felicia during the tea party. Felicia had forced a smile and nodded in reply.

"Yes, my mother has always strived to be a good influence on others," Felicia said, knowing she needed always to be polite about her parents. Just because she was in the countryside didn't mean that gossip couldn't spread to Town in just two days.

"Do you ever feel pressure to become just like your mother?" Miss Beverly had asked as they sat around a large table and sipped lavender tea.

"No, I do not," Felicia replied. "My mother has impressed upon me all that she knows, but my parents have never forced me to become a socialite."

“But it’s important to marry sooner rather than later,” Lady Young had said, the mother of Miss Beverly.

“Right you are, Lady Young,” Sierra had said, speaking up. “That is why I am hosting the gallery event next week. I want to introduce Felicia into society here in our neighbourhood with the hopes of making a good match for her.”

“You are too kind, Your Grace,” Lady Young had replied. “I shall make my own recommendations for suitable partners for Lady Felicia so that she may marry well.”

“Thank you, Lady Young,” Felicia said. She might not like how much her parents flaunted their wealth in public, but she did appreciate everything she’d been taught about having good manners. She would use everything she learned to charm those in the countryside, even though she wasn’t being her true self.

Unlike at the tea party, Felicia felt completely normal when she was painting with Mr Reed and had Miss Mathews for company. Little by little, Mr Reed tutored her on the construction of her painting.

Felicia was able to have in-depth conversations with the master gardener about painting techniques without having to be afraid of what the man’s opinion would be of her. For one, he was just a servant. But more than anything, Felicia wanted someone to accept her for who she was. She didn’t want to pretend anymore. Therefore, she felt completely relaxed with Mr Reed during their painting lessons.

“As you continue working on your painting, you’ll find that you will start to use smaller and smaller brushes for all the fine details,” Mr Reed instructed. “The big brushes are used for the background and then applying the base colour for all the main aspects of your drawing, but these fine-tipped brushes will allow you to add the highlights and lowlights of each little item in your painting. From the ripples of the water to the blades of grass.”

Felicia hung on every word Mr Reed uttered to her. She wanted to memorize everything he said, knowing that one day she would marry and have to be without his lessons. Therefore, she used every second of her free time with Mr Reed to learn as much as she could. She found Mr Reed not only extremely striking but someone who was inspiring her to create the best art of her life.

“Lady Felicia, I wish to share something with you,” Mr Reed said.

Felicia turned her eyes from her painting, holding her paintbrush still as she looked up at Mr Reed. Miss Mathews had gone to fetch a tea tray even though Felicia was happy to work right through lunch till the sun began to set.

“Yes, Mr Reed?” she encouraged, thinking that the master gardener had some more knowledge about painting to share with her. She was working on the pond’s highlights with the morning sun and wondered what more she could do.

“I have never taught anyone painting before, but I hope that if I do more lessons in the future, then all of my students will be as talented and attentive as you are,” Mr Reed said with a smile that made his blue eyes sparkle. Felicia was so touched by his words that she blushed.



“I have learned so much from you that I wish I could spend each day listening to your instructions and create wonderful paintings as you do. I have looked at many of your paintings while walking through the hallways. I fear that only one summer will not be enough to learn everything I can from you,” Felicia said honestly, her eyes on her painting as she spoke. She didn’t know how Mr Reed was going to react to her comment, and she felt a bit shy saying such strong words about him when she wasn’t sure how her statement would be received.

“When the time comes for us to part, Lady Felicia, I shall wish you the most happiness in the world,” Mr Reed said with a sigh. “And I shall never forget this time that we’ve spent together. It has truly been a happy time for me, as well.”

Felicia looked up towards his face then, seeing the way he was smiling. But this time, his smile didn’t quite reach his eyes. It made her wonder if that, in some way, he would be sad when her summer came to an end, or when she married a man she had met during this time. All that Felicia was hoping was to marry a man accepting of her and her passion for art.

When Miss Mathews returned to the music room with the tea tray, Felicia decided it was best to take a break. It had become routine for the three of them to share a meal together. Mr Reed would talk more about his life growing up at the Duke’s estate, which Felicia found interesting because she did not know much about a servant’s life or how one entered into such types of employment.

“Being the youngest of five siblings, I feel I had a lot of opportunities in life. I always had an older sibling to play with. And when they all married and left home, I was then old enough to come to the duke’s estate with my father. Since the current Duke is only a few years older than I, we sometimes played as children in the gardens before we

knew that we were so different,” Mr Reed had explained, a smile on his face as he remembered those times with the young duke.

“It is truly interesting what children forget as they come to understand the world. It is only through art that everyone can become equal,” Mr Reed then added after a brief pause, as though he was recalling deep memories.

“For me, perhaps,” Felicia had said with a smirk. “Art for ladies is just a hobby. For men, it can be employment. I could never hope to spend my life painting and selling my pieces. I must marry a gentleman and rely on him for my livelihood.”

“At least, that is what’s expected of you because of your birth,” Miss Mathews spoke up.

“It is truly a shame that one’s future must be determined based on birth. I was born into a low-class family, but have more freedoms than those of wealth,” Mr Reed pointed out. Felicia sighed as she nodded, sipping her tea. Conversation with Mr Reed and Miss Mathews was always so enlightening. Nothing like the boring conversation she usually had to deal with when at a tea party or dinner party. She could spend the day with her two companions and never grow bored.

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“I believe the hardest part of this painting is remembering the exact details of that morning,” Felicia said a few days before the gallery event. Her painting was almost complete, but she was having difficulties with the fine details. It had been so long since she had sketched the drawing that now she tried hard to remember what it looked like originally in her mind.

“Sometimes when you can’t think clearly about what you are trying to paint, it is good to return to the source of your inspiration,” Mr Reed suggested. “There is a small pond on the west side of the property, just past the gardens. You can see the pond in the morning as the sunlight hits the water’s source, and it may help you remember.”

“I can certainly do that,” Felicia said, excited to know that not all was lost.

Therefore, the next morning, she rose early and pulled on her boots, throwing on her house robe since she didn’t plan to be gone from the house that long, and she surely was the only one awake at such earlier hours. She made her way outside and followed Mr Reed’s instructions, finding her way through the gardens to the pond. However, she was surprised to know she wasn’t the only one.

There, standing shirtless in just his trousers, Mr Reed was standing by the water’s edge. Felicia was so surprised by the sight of a shirtless man that she couldn’t help staring at his muscled body. He was tanned everywhere, it seemed, making Felicia wonder how often Mr Reed was outside with little clothing on. Felicia watched with curiosity as Mr Reed bent down to untie his boots, and then when he was just wearing his trousers, he dove into the pond.

Hiding behind a tall hedge, Felicia peeked her head around to watch Mr Reed with a bright smile on her face. He looked so at peace as he swam around the pond before making his way back to the shore. As Mr Reed came out of the water, the morning sun glistened on his skin as though he was made of precious stones. He was certainly like a Greek god, coming to life in front of her. Felicia felt too embarrassed to reveal that she had been watching his nearly naked form. Therefore, she forced herself to look away as she made her way back inside, feeling warm all over.

Felicia smirked as she made her way back into the grand estate. She couldn't help thinking of how handsome Mr Reed was, how beautiful his body was, and how she'd never seen a man look like that before. Most of the gentlemen she'd been introduced to before had soft features and were not muscular at all. Even her own father had a very large middle. Therefore, the very thought of Mr Reed's body and perhaps how it would feel to the touch entertained Felicia's mind as she slowly made her way back to her bedchamber.

"There you are," Miss Mathews said as Felicia reached her bedchamber on the second floor.

"I went for an early morning walk," Felicia said, shrugging off her housecoat before laying it on her bed.

"My Lady, you shouldn't be out and about in just your housecoat. That is quite scandalous," Miss Mathews said as she shut Felicia's bedchamber door and then began preparing her for the day. Felicia smiled, thinking how scandalous it had been to gaze upon Mr Reed and feel no regrets at all.

## Chapter 7

A rustling in the hedges told Ernest that someone had been there. As the water dripped from him, he was about to head back towards the small cottage on the duke's land just around the corner of a thicket of trees that framed half of the pond. Curious, however, Ernest followed the sound of rustling leaves as he went after whoever was in the garden.

A smile came to his face as the garden opened up, and he saw Lady Felicia hurrying towards the open back door. He stopped in his tracks, knowing who had been spying on him. A sense of pride washed over Ernest as he thought about the fact that Lady Felicia had spied on him in such a vulnerable position. He was thoroughly wet and practically naked without his muslin shirt on. It made him wonder what she had thought of his figure.

As Ernest made his way back through the garden towards his cottage, he couldn't help thinking of Lady Felicia. Had she revealed herself, he may have been bold to approach her and offer to show her around the pond. Yet, he knew how improper it would have been in his current state of dress. That and Lady Felicia had been without her lady's maid. He knew the rules and tried his best to follow them, even when Lady Felicia was such a tempting thought.

The last two weeks tutoring Lady Felicia had been some of the most pleasurable days in his life. She was a wonderful student and someone whose passion for painting was close to his own. Though they were just focusing on one painting for now, after the gallery event, he had plans to start taking Lady Felicia out of the music room to be in nature and discuss the ways he'd paint everything he saw. If Lady Felicia could see the world as he did, he would know for sure if they were soulmates.

Once Ernest was dressed for the day, he hurried across the grounds towards the grand estate's kitchens. All the servants would be gathering shortly to hear the housekeeper's morning message, along with the butlers. Then, he would grab a bite to eat before he went out to the gardens to oversee today's work. The sky was cloudy, hinting to perhaps rain showers in the afternoon.

"Gather around everyone," called the stern voice of Mrs Tanner as Ernest made his way into the grand house and through the kitchens to the servants' quarters. There was a large dining room just for the servants. Most of the maids and footmen were seated at the long table while everyone else stood around the room.

"Her Grace will be hosting a social event in just two days. This estate needs to be flawless. The floors polished, the furniture dusted, and all the food ingredients in check. There is no room for error," Mrs Tanner said, her hands folded before her as she looked down her hooked nose at everyone, her beady eyes burning into each person. Ernest thought Mrs Tanner was a very creepy person and couldn't understand why the duke kept her on after his father's passing.

After the morning announcements and orders were dished out, Ernest made his way through the kitchen quickly to get a few mutton-filled bread rolls. He was nibbling on a roll as he went outside and started making his rounds. He spoke with all of his workers, wanting to ensure that progress was still being made for the gallery event in two days. Guests would take to the gardens if the weather were decent, so he didn't want anything to be out of place.

"Master Reed," called young Jeffery. Ernest was making his way through the rose bushes along the side of the house. Ernest turned to see the young lad coming his way at a fast run. "Mrs Tanner wants fresh flowers for the gallery and wants you in the servants' quarters to explain what arrangements you'll be putting together."

Ernest knew that he'd soon be having his daily lessons with Lady Felicia and sighed at the thought of running late. He wanted to make sure everything was good in the gardens before he left for the day. Though his men knew he would be available at a moment's notice, they had all been nice enough to allow him the time he needed to really teach Lady Felicia well.

"Alright then, I shall go and see her," he said with a sigh, dismissing Jeffery.

Ernest made his way back through the gardens as he finished eating his breakfast. He stopped in the kitchen for a glass of water, winking at the kitchen maids that giggled as he came through. As he made his way to the large dining room for the servants, he found Mrs Tanner there, standing at the head of the table as her eyes peered down her nose. Ernest was certain the woman enjoyed being over all the other servants in the house beside the butler.

"Mrs Tanner," he greeted with a nod.

"Mr Reed," Mrs Tanner said with a small smile on her face. "I wanted to speak to you about the flower arrangements."

"The roses are still in bloom, as well as the chamomile, baby's breath, marigolds, daisies, and other wildflowers," Ernest announced, hoping he could finish this conversation as quickly as he could.

"Her Grace has requested something unique. Therefore, I don't believe the roses will be needed," Mrs Tanner explained. She moved from the head of the table and came to stand next to Ernest. "You know, Mr

Reed, there are ways for you to excel in this household.”

“I’m quite happy where I am,” Ernest said, wondering what Mrs Tanner was implying.

“The duke’s valet would make you a much wealthier man,” Mrs Tanner said, raising her hand and resting it on Ernest’s shoulder. It felt like cold death to him as he shrugged off her touch.

“I don’t desire more than I have,” Ernest said, taking several steps back. “I will have the flower arrangements prepared the morning of the event.” And with that, Ernest left the servants’ quarters in a hurry, hearing Mrs Tanner chuckle behind him.

Ernest felt all sorts of strange as he went back out into the garden. He took a long walk around the gardens, trying to collect his thoughts. It felt strange that Mrs Tanner would touch him like that, and he knew that she was married. Therefore, what would a married woman want with him? He didn’t like to dwell on the matter and pushed the thought out of his head as he finally made it to the music room.

Ernest smiled as he came into the room from the open doors. Miss Mathews was sitting on a chair, some needlepoint in her hands. She looked up and waved at Ernest before returning to her work. He turned his eyes to Lady Felicia, seeing that she was already hard at work.

“Forgive me for the delay,” Ernest said as he approached the young lady and bowed.



“Fear not, Mr Reed. I have begun without you in hopes I might show that I have been listening to your lectures,” Lady Felicia replied, smiling as she paused and looked up at him, a smile on her face. Every time Ernest saw Lady Felicia, his breath was taken away by her immense beauty.

“You certainly have been listening,” Ernest said as he leaned over the table to inspect the highlights she had made to the pond. Feeling a little mischievous, he asked, “Had you the opportunity this morning to visit the pond in the morning light?”

“Why yes,” Lady Felicia said, a clear blush coming to her cheeks as she dipped her thin brush in the paint of light grey and green to create the necessary highlights on the pond. “I found the view to be quite refreshing. I’ve had all sorts of other paintings I wish to create in the future.”

“Perhaps you’d enjoy painting a human portrait in the future?” Ernest suggested, thinking how fun it was to tease Lady Felicia. He certainly liked the way she blushed and couldn’t help thinking of all the ways he’d like to make her blush if he could just get some time alone with her.

“I would consider it if I had a good model for the painting,” Lady Felicia replied, her eyes still on her painting.

“Perhaps something you saw this morning would be of good use to you,” Ernest said, lowering his voice.

Lady Felicia looked up at him then and smirked at him. “Perhaps,” was all she said. But he could see the desire in her eyes. It was unmistakable and made his heart pound with excitement. Could it be

that Lady Felicia pined for him the way he felt towards her? This time Ernest was blushing as he refocused on her painting. He wished there was a way he could act on his feelings for Lady Felicia but knew that because they were so different in society standings, being together would surely be impossible.

“My Lady, I shall return shortly. I must fetch some more thread for this cushion,” Miss Mathews replied, approaching her lady.

“Of course, Miss Mathews,” Lady Felicia said with a nod. Miss Mathews left then, giving them a moment of privacy that Ernest wondered if he could use to his advantage.

“Did you plan on taking a morning swim after giving me such good advice about recreating the memory of the pond?” Lady Felicia asked, sticking her paintbrush in the paint and looking up at Ernest. He couldn’t help laughing as he stood and crossed his arms over his chest.

“If you must know, My Lady, I take a swim every morning to help wake me,” Ernest said. “I did not think ladies of your status rose at such early hours.”

“How else would I have known what the sun looks like in the morning?” Lady Felicia teased.

“Perhaps I did not take you seriously,” Ernest said, averting his eyes.

“Well, do you now take me seriously?” Lady Felicia asked, standing to her feet and stretching.

“Very,” Ernest replied, letting his arms drop to his sides as he looked at Lady Felicia. How dearly he wanted to take her in his arms, press his lips against hers, and use the table as a bed as he found the most sensitive parts of her body. Being around her made him warm all over, and at night when he was left with his thoughts, he couldn’t deny how stiff his member became at just the thought of her.

“I like to be taken seriously,” Lady Felicia said, coming to stand in front of him. “It seems you are the only man who has ever looked about my drawings and saw the beauty in them while others just saw something else to dominate. Or to see my art as something to admire as long as they could have my hand in marriage.”

“I think your drawings are very lovely,” Ernest said, wanting to reach out and touch her. “You are almost complete with your first painting and already look like you’ll become a master.”

“Only because I had such a good tutor,” Lady Felicia said, a smile on her face as she looked up at Ernest. “I shall think of some way to repay you one day for what you’ve taught me, your great company, and intellectual conversation. I doubt I shall ever meet another man like you.”

“That is because there is not another man like me,” Ernest teased. “But I do hope you’ll one day meet a gentleman who can appreciate you and your artwork.”

Ernest noticed the way Lady Felicia’s smile faded as she turned and walked away towards the open doors to look out into the gardens. The clouded skies had only darkened the day further, making him think that the sky fitted her quick change in mood. “What saddens you?” Ernest asked, taking a few steps towards Lady Felicia,

but keeping his distance because he knew that Miss Mathews would be returning shortly.

“I know that it is important for me to marry,” Lady Felicia said with a sigh. “But I doubt I shall meet a man who accepts me for who I am and the things I love in life. I shall only be a pretty face to whoever I marry.”

“Surely that can’t be the truth,” Ernest said. “There are people of elite status that do marry for love, like the duke and duchess.”

“But more often than not, it is not the case. My own parents married for convenience, and they have both lived such miserable lives,” Lady Felicia confessed. “I wish to marry for love, but who will accept me for my greatest pleasures in life?”

Ernest wanted to speak up and say that he would greatly enjoy marrying a woman that shared in his passion for painting and artwork. He knew that the duke was a lover of art as well, and surely there would be other gentlemen that shared the duke’s same view. He had a lot of hope for Lady Felicia, but he could tell that she had little faith in her future.

The sound of footsteps echoed along the marble floors outside the music room. Ernest turned away from Lady Felicia and walked over to the mahogany table as though he was inspecting the painting. Miss Mathews came back into the room with the tea tray, setting it on the smaller table by the sofa as she began to serve. It was only when Lady Felicia took a seat at the table that he turned to face them.

“Thank you, Miss Mathews,” Ernest said as he came and took the seat furthest away.

“Certainly, Mr Reed,” Miss Mathews said with a sweet smile. It reminded him of what Mrs Tanner had tried to attempt earlier. He shivered at the thought, accepting a cup of tea and sipping as he averted his eyes from the young ladies. He wondered if he needed to guard himself from all the women on the staff.

Once they had finished enjoying the small lunch of pickled cucumbers and sandwiches, Ernest returned to his lessons with Lady Felicia. He watched her painting, giving advice from time to time, but in his opinion, she had taken to painting like a fish to water.

She had a natural talent, and anyone who would look upon this painting would know as well. Ernest’s gaze was taken from the painting when he heard more footsteps approaching. He took a few steps away as the duke and duchess entered, with Mrs Tanner right behind them. The sight of the woman made him feel uneasy as he dropped his eyes and bowed.

“Felicia, darling. You must show Daniel your progress,” the duchess said as she came to her friend’s side.

“I thought you would wait for the great revealing,” Lady Felicia said. She set her paintbrush aside and stood from the table so that the Duke and Duchess could see her work.

“My word, Lady Felicia, you could very well lie and say you’ve painted all your life, and I would believe you,” the duke said, his eyes focusing on every detail of the painting.

“Thank you, Your Grace. I would have to give credit to Mr Reed for his kind instruction. He has been quite patient with me with my progress and feel that I have made great improvements because of his teachings,” Lady Felicia said, looking towards Ernest.

Ernest smiled but kept his eyes towards the ground to show respect to his masters. He wouldn't make eye contact until he was spoken to.

“I am pleased to hear that Mr Reed has been a good teacher,” the duke said, giving Ernest a nod.

“It is an honour to offer my assistance in this matter,” Ernest said as he bowed in return. “Lady Felicia is a talented painter. I do believe she has the makings to be a master one day.”

“What wonderful news,” the duchess said, smiling at her friend. “I am sure we can pair you with a gentleman that would think your talents are quite special.”

“I do hope so as well,” Lady Felicia said, though the smile on her face didn't quite reach her eyes. Ernest could tell that she wasn't telling the truth.

“Come, Felicia. I want to show you the ballroom and where I think your painting will best be displayed. You can return later to finish up any last details,” the duchess suggested.

“Of course. I would love to see how the ballroom is being transformed for the gallery,” Lady Felicia said.

Ernest stood still as he watched Lady Felicia join the duke and duchess. Miss Mathews gave him a small wave as she followed after her mistress, while he moved to preserve the paints till Lady Felicia returned. But he stilled when he realized Mrs Tanner was still in the room. Ernest looked up and made eye contact, waiting to see if she was going to say anything. Instead, Mrs Tanner winked at him before she turned and left, making Ernest feel dirty all over. As soon as he finished preserving the paints and the brushes, he made his way out to the garden.

## Chapter 8

Montgomery Manor was transformed into a fairy tale story. The ballroom had long drapes of translucent white fabric that seemed to sparkle in the noon daylight. A light wind blew in through the many open doors that led out to the garden. Several tables had been set up on the veranda to allow guests to enjoy their refreshments outside and walk in the garden if they preferred.

“Are you nervous?” Sierra asked, capturing Felicia’s attention as she looked around the room.

Sierra was dressed in a lovely blue gown with a layer of white lace over the skirt so that it shined like the drapes. Felicia had chosen a lavender gown for herself, one that she knew her mother would be proud of. It had short sleeves and a deep neckline that she had filled with ruffled cloth to protect the tops of her bosom from prying eyes.

“I suppose a little,” Felicia said. “I haven’t been this nervous since my mother debuted me into society.”

“Well, your painting is upfront and centre,” Sierra said, pointing to the display stand. There were places around the ballroom for participants to display their artwork, but it was only Felicia’s painting that would be in the middle of everything.

“Therefore, I know many will see it, and I can only hope that it will be appreciated. I know that that painting is fairly good, but I am a female artist. No serious man would appreciate a female artist,” Felicia reasoned.



“Besides my dear husband, of course,” Sierra said with a smile.

“Yes, but your husband is already happily married,” Felicia teased. “Therefore, I hope to meet someone like him, or at least someone I could tolerate well enough.”

“But you must marry for love, Felicia. That is the only true way to marry,” Sierra said as they walked together around the room.

“Sierra, you know very well that young ladies like me don’t get the choice to marry for love often. You were so lucky to fall in love with a man who was above your station and loved you in return,” Felicia said with a sigh.

“Has there never been a man that has caught your fancy?” Sierra asked.

Mr Reed came to mind immediately. Every time Felicia was with him, she was completely relaxed. She didn’t fear being judged for her opinion or love of art. More than anything, she thought of him as very handsome. She often found herself peeking at him from the corner of her eyes as she painted, wondering what it would be like to intertwine her fingers into his hair, to kiss the places where the skin had touched his skin to know if it felt hot to the touch. There was so much about Mr Reed that excited her that she sometimes had difficulty focusing on her painting and not thinking about all the things she’d like to do with Mr Reed if they were ever alone.

“There is not a gentleman of society that has caught my attention,” Felicia admitted, knowing that she was at least telling a part truth. Mr

Reed was not a gentleman of society. He was just a master gardener. And yet, he had captivated her in every way.

Guests started to arrive into the ballroom soon after, forcing Sierra and Felicia to begin greetings. The duke soon joined them as footmen carried in the framed art pieces from other young ladies and gentlemen in the neighbourhood. It was so overwhelming for Felicia that she had to pinch the inside of her palm below her white gloves to keep her focused. She wasn't a socialite at all, and her instincts told her to hide in the garden till the party was over.

"It's so lovely to meet you, Lady Felicia," said Lord Miller. "My daughter has told me so much about you from the tea party earlier this week."

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lord Miller. Your daughter was delightful to speak with," Felicia replied, remembering every lesson on manners that her mother and governess had given her. Even though she felt a ball of nerves running around in her stomach, she forced herself to remain as calm as possible and continue to be polite.

"Such kind manners," Lord Miller said with a smile. "Young ladies like you don't stay single for very long."

"I sure hope so," Sierra said, capturing the viscount's attention once more. It gave Felicia a moment of peace to take a deep breath and let it out slowly.

When all the guests had arrived, and the paintings had been displayed about the room, the pair walked together with the duke around the makeshift gallery. A few pieces Felicia had to do her best not to laugh at. Not everyone who had displayed their work would be what she

would call talented.

“My goodness, my dear. Is that a goose running for his life, the hunt about to begin?” Daniel whispered softly.

“My dear, be kind,” Sierra shushed. But Felicia couldn’t contain her chuckles as she covered her mouth with her gloved hand.

“I was being kind,” Daniel replied as he shook his head.

When the viewing was finished, Felicia went to the buffet tables and collected a plate of sandwiches and a glass of mint tea before taking to the veranda. The tables looked to be all filled with guests, so she took her refreshments to the garden, finding a nice stone bench to sit upon as she enjoyed her meal.

“May I join you?” came a masculine voice. Felicia turned to see a gentleman standing a few feet away from her, just near the hedge separating her from the rest of the party.

“Forgive me, but we have not been properly introduced,” Felicia said, knowing it would not be good for her to be seen with a gentleman she did not know at all.

“You are quite correct,” the man said, chuckling. He had light brown hair and dark brown eyes. By the style of his clothing and the fabric of his vest, Felicia could easily guess that the man was very wealthy. He had a pretty face, but Felicia had learned not to judge a person based on looks alone.

“My name is Lord Paulson, Earl of Paulson,” he said with a bow. “My estate neighbours His Grace’s.”

“I see,” Felicia said, standing to her feet. “Lady Felicia Casey.”

“That I surely already know,” Lord Paulson said with a smile. “After all, you are certainly the talk of the neighbourhood. Your parents have such a high reputation in Town that I was surprised to hear you were alone here in the country.”

“I would hardly say alone,” Felicia replied. “I am a guest of the duke and duchess for the summer.”

“Then perhaps I can call on you again?” Lord Paulson offered. “In a more appropriate setting.”

Felicia knew the moment had arrived for her to make a choice. This gallery event was one of many events that Sierra was planning, hoping that one day she would marry well. With this man before her being an earl, it would be the most logical choice for her. *But could she ever love this man?* Certainly, Felicia wouldn’t be able to decide until she learned more about him. “Feel free to call upon me, Lord Paulson. I’m sure the duke and duchess would appreciate your company as well,” she replied, trying to remain polite.

“Then I shall do so in the future,” Lord Paulson said with a nod.

Felicia watched as he walked away, disappearing behind the hedges.

She waited for a moment longer, making sure she was completely alone before turning her focus back to her mint tea and sandwiches. She'd feel better when there was some food in her stomach. Once she was done, Felicia knew she needed to return to the party and socialize with the others, even if that didn't sound particularly exciting.

"From what I can hear, you are the talk of the party," came a familiar voice.

Felicia looked up to see Mr Reed coming from the other side of the garden, rounding the base of an oak tree to approach her.

"I suppose the staff hears all sorts of things," Felicia said with a smile.

"That we certainly do," Mr Reed agreed, placing his hands on his hips. "The garden is full of all sort of buzz this afternoon, and the staff just soaks it all up and spreads it around."

"Then perhaps you'd like to share some good gossip with me?" Felicia asked as she stood to her feet.

"I wouldn't call it gossip. But everyone is talking about your fine painting and how you'd make a fabulous match for a gentleman," Mr Reed said, stepping towards one of the walking paths through the gardens.

Felicia joined him, thinking she could be away from the party for a moment longer. "I have already been approached by a gentleman who wished to call upon me in the future."

“Was he very handsome and wealthy?” Mr Reed teased.

“I suppose you could say that,” Felicia said with a chuckle. “But I still must learn of his character. That’s the way it goes. Parties and such to learn the characteristics of a person, only to marry and find out they are not what you expected them to be.”

“You speak from experience,” Mr Reed observed.

“I sometimes imagine that is what my parents must have thought when they married. They are so bitter now that I wish to avoid such a fate,” Felicia admitted.

“You are a very beautiful young lady if you don’t mind me saying,” Mr Reed said as they stopped beside a weeping willow. Its long branches hung down around them, giving them a moment of privacy from the rest of the party and the house.

“I don’t mind you saying at all,” Felicia replied with a smile. “We’ve worked so closely together these last few weeks that I could say we are friends like I am friends with Miss Mathews. Even despite our standings in society.”

“Lady Felicia, I ...” Mr Reed stumbled over his words, making Felicia wonder what he was trying to say. Then, suddenly, he closed the space between them and wrapped his strong arms around her, smelling of fresh rose blooms as he planted his lips upon hers.

Felicia immediately relaxed in his arms, having thought of this moment for so long. His arms felt immensely strong around her, as though she weighed nothing as he pulled her tight against his body. She closed her eyes and gave into the kiss as she arched her back to return it.

Her mind told her that she needed to stop this nonsense and return swiftly to the party, but the feeling was too good for her to gain control of her actions. She simply melted into his arms as his tongue pressed between her lips, contacting with her own; she moaned. Never before had she known that a kiss could be so good.

Suddenly, Mr Reed broke the kiss the moment Felicia had pressed her hips up against his to feel the stiffness of his member. "I shouldn't – we shouldn't have," he mumbled, placing his hand on the base of the willow tree as he caught his breath.

Felicia was breathing hard as well, as she felt feverish all over.

"I have no regrets," Felicia said softly. "I have longed for this month ever since you started tutoring me."

"Lady Felicia, you should return immediately back to the party," Mr Reed said, still averting his eyes. "I assure you this will never happen again. Please accept my deepest apologies."

Felicia felt hurt as she listened to Mr Reed. She had just experienced the most dazzling thing in her life and, already, she was hungry for more. If Mr Reed didn't want to kiss her again, if he was acting so strange now, then why had he kissed her in the first place? But she said no more as she lifted her skirts and headed quickly back through the garden and towards the sound of chatter.

She felt flushed as she dropped her skirts and slowed her pace as she stepped out from behind the hedge. Felicia walked slowly and, with her chin raised high, she strolled across the gardens and up the stone stairs to the veranda. With a faint smile, she stepped inside the doors of the ballroom and sought Sierra out once more.

“Did you enjoy your fresh air in the gardens?” Sierra asked.

“I sure did,” Felicia replied, thinking of the wonderful kiss she’d just shared with the man she most admired. But she forced herself to push those thoughts out of her mind as she remembered the other gentleman. “A Lord Paulson approached me when I was in the garden. He introduced himself and said he would pay me a visit in the future.”

“That is such wonderful news!” Sierra said in an excited whisper. “I dined with him once after Daniel and I were married. He was a charming man.”

“Yes, he was a true gentleman. He was quick to introduce himself and said he would visit in the future, so the situation was more appropriate since I did not have a chaperone with me at that moment,” Felicia explained.

“I am pleased to hear this. I believe he will be a good match for you,” Sierra said, looking towards Felicia before glancing back at the crowd. “I saw him looking at your painting for an extended period. I think he really likes it.”

“I’ll be able to judge his character in the future,” Felicia reasoned. “Tis



the beginning of summer still. There is time to form an idea about the man.”

“I hope you will fall in love with him,” Sierra said with a smile. “To be in love is such a wonderful thing.”

Felicia only nodded as she turned her thoughts back to Mr Reed. If only he were a nobleman, she would fall in love with him immediately and spend the rest of her days happy as his wife. They would create art together, enjoy passions like she had experienced with that one kiss; no doubt have a large family together. Though she knew that Lord Paulson was the type of man her parents would approve of, her body called for Mr Reed.

As the gallery event came to an end, many of the guests approached Felicia to commend her artistic abilities. Even a few hoped to see her artwork in the future at perhaps a ball.

“I plan to host a ball soon,” Sierra said, much to the delight of many of the guests.

A few gentlemen left their calling card with Felicia, stating they would like to visit her in the future. She knew she should be flattered, but all she could think of was how many of them were honestly interested in her as a person and not just a pretty face. Or, perhaps they were after her dowry, which she knew was quite substantial. It was one of the many reasons she had decided to stay away from social events in the past. She was just a horse on auction, and not someone others wanted to know better.

“My dear, you should come rest after such a stressing event,” Daniel said as he came to collect his wife.

“You should do the same, Felicia. Get some rest before dinner,” Sierra said before she left the ballroom with her husband.

Felicia stood alone for a moment, the staff coming in to clear away the painting stands and the food from the buffet tables. She went to stand in front of her painting, to really look at it. As she took in the colours, the layers she had formed to create a pond, a tree standing beside it, and the rising sun, she thought how marvellous it had truly turned out to be. However, she knew that it was truly Mr Reed that had guided her each step of the way so she could make such a wonderful piece.

Felicia thought more about Mr Reed’s words to her after their kiss, the quickness in which he had recoiled from her. Now that the gallery was over, she didn’t want to stop her lessons with Mr Reed. She wanted to learn from him so much more but wondered now if he would change his mind about teaching her.

Thinking that a bit of rest wouldn’t hurt her, Felicia made her way from the ballroom. She travelled down the hallway when she suddenly looked up from where she was walking and watching the ground. Mrs Tanner was standing right in the middle of the hallway, blocking her path.

“Excuse me,” Felicia said, feeling strange around the housekeeper. She was a dark looking woman that Felicia tried to avoid.

“Of course, My Lady,” Mrs Tanner said grimly, slowly stepping aside as she looked down her nose at her.

Felicia averted her eyes as she quickly walked around the woman and hurried up the stairs to her bedchamber. She was certain a leisurely nap would do her much good after the day's events.

## Chapter 9

Ernest felt so foolish after Lady Felicia walked away, his body wanting to hold her tight underneath the weeping willow tree where the outside world didn't seem to exist. Instead, he let her go, wondering if she would say anything to the duke and duchess. He'd heard rumours of scorned ladies who didn't get what they wanted, blaming their troubles on the staff so that they were fired without any recommendations. He truly didn't want to end up with that fate.

Eventually, Ernest left the cover of the weeping willow and took a long walk through the gardens. The party would be wrapping up shortly, and the estate would become quiet once more. He needed to cool off, his body still reacting to the way Lady Felicia had felt in his arms. He'd kissed women before, had stolen kisses from some of the maids in the house, but never had he felt anything like what he'd felt with her.

She was so light in his arms as he had pulled her to his chest. Her lips had been full and delicate like kissing rose petals. As he'd pressed his tongue against hers, she'd tasted like honey. Ernest could have feasted on her lips for hours and not have grown tired at all. More than anything, he wanted to take her to a place where he could have his way with her for hours on end. But even then, he wouldn't be satisfied until he'd made her officially his.

That was the thought that had broken the spell on Ernest's mind while he'd kissed her. The moment she began to moan against his lips, when he'd felt her press herself up against him, he knew he couldn't go any further. Lady Felicia was meant to marry a man that would be more suitable for her, that was a nobleman and someone who had enough wealth to keep up her way of life.

It was hard to deny his feelings, to tell Lady Felicia he would never do such a thing again when his body urged him to go find her, to finally let his body do everything his mind had been fantasizing about since he'd first laid eyes on the beautiful woman. But instead, he walked the gardens till he grew tired and exhausted. Only then did he ensure that the grounds were being maintained after the party came to an end.

Ernest had to determine if he was willing to continue his lessons with Lady Felicia. Now that the gallery was over with, surely she had no more use for them. Though there was much more he wanted to show her, to begin taking her out of the house to explain his process of painting when he saw a beautiful landscape, he knew that the more time he spent with the young lady, the more he'd want to do more than just kiss her pretty face.

Ernest took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Tomorrow he wouldn't appear in the music room for the painting lessons. If he was asked for, he would answer the call of the summons. If the duke or duchess asked him to continue his lessons, he would, but he would not teach Lady Felicia anymore if it came down to his own choice.

"Master Reed!" called a familiar voice.

Ernest stopped in his fast walking to see that Jeffery was trotting after him. "Yes, lad?" Ernest asked, holding still until Jeffery caught up with him.

"Mrs Tanner is asking all extra hands be called into the house to help clean up after the party," Jeffery explained.

Ernest rolled his eyes, thinking there were plenty of footmen and maids to do the work. "Go on, Jeffery. I will remain behind and make

sure nothing was left behind in the garden.”

Jeffery nodded, turning then and heading back towards the estate. Ernest began to do his rounds of the garden, of the places that were close to the ballroom. As he searched, he found plenty of dishes to bring into the ballroom to be picked up by the maids. Feeling he'd done his part, he returned back outside.

It was a beautiful day, and he knew it was the type of day that his father would have enjoyed the most. Ernest knew that he was quite lucky to have taken over his father's life work in the gardens and that he should be very grateful for a master who was willing to encourage his love of painting. He knew that he shouldn't risk everything he had going for him when it came to Lady Felicia.

“Dear Lord, what I am going to do?” he muttered as he circled around the garden, looking at the new growth of the rose bushes. They would need trimming as soon as their blooms had wilted and fallen to the ground. The other wildflowers would be wilting the next few weeks, all the beauty of the garden passing away to just the colours of green. Ernest thought it was fitting that by the end of summer, Lady Felicia would be gone, and so would be the garden's best aspects. Perhaps his feelings for the beautiful young lady would die with the garden as it moved into hibernation for the winter months.

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Try as she might, resting didn't seem to be a feasible option for Felicia. Though she had bathed for a leisurely amount of time, laid down in a fresh chemise, and opened the windows in her bedchamber to let in a cool breeze, she wasn't able to quiet her thoughts. She couldn't help continuing to think about the kiss she'd shared with Mr Reed and perhaps what it would mean for her.

The idea of marrying a commoner was not something she would have considered before. After all, her parents expected her to marry a nobleman of title and fortune. Though she was determined to marry for love, what would her parents say if she gave her heart to a working-class man like Mr Reed?

Felicia tried hard to think of anything else but the way she'd felt in his arms. How the kiss had ignited a fire in her soul that threatened to consume her whole being. Despite being scarcely dressed, Felicia felt a roaring fire rolling over her skin as she thought about the wonderful kiss.

"But it must never happen again," Felicia said softly as she stared up at the ceiling, at the white crown moulding and intricate design of the metal ceiling tiles that reflected the sun. It was such a beautiful house that she couldn't help taking in all the details from the ceiling's design to the dark papered forest green walls.

She knew what her parents expected of her, what she had to do when it came to her future. A man like Lord Paulson would be a more suitable match for her. Perhaps this kiss was just a way to show her what married life would be like? Felicia wondered if kissing a man like Lord Paulson would cause her to feel the same feelings. Try as she might, she was not able to think of the answers she so terribly sought.

After a time, a knock sounded on her bedchamber door. She called to the person, inviting them in. When Miss Mathews came into the room, she was not surprised since the grandfather clock in the corner of the room showed that it would soon be time for dinner.

"How was your rest, My Lady?" Miss Mathews asked as she shut the door behind her and went immediately to her wardrobe to pick out a

gown for the evening.

“There was so much excitement today that I could hardly rest,” Felicia admitted as she stood from her four-poster bed. She smoothed down the bed covers, feeling their soft texture, and thinking that everything in the duke’s home was rather lovely. But would these things be the items she would need in her house one day to be happy? Felicia was still debating with herself as she let Miss Mathews dress her.

“I’m sure you had all sorts of fun,” Miss Mathews said happily as she helped Felicia into a beautiful burgundy gown. “Did you feel like you met anyone that would be a good match?”

“Yes, there was one gentleman that introduced himself to me and said he would call on me soon,” Felicia explained.

“A gentleman introduced himself to you? Before asking permission from His Grace?” Miss Mathews asked, her brows furrowing.

“Yes, I suppose his actions were bold,” Felicia said, even though she didn’t agree with her own statement. What she’d done with Mr Reed had been bold. “But he was kind and stayed his distance, promising to speak to me again in a more appropriate setting in the future.”

“I’ll be sure to be your chaperone at all times,” Miss Mathews said with a huff. “I shall not let any gentleman take advantage of someone so sweet as you.”

“You’re too kind, Miss Mathews,” Felicia said with a chuckle. “But I can assure you that I can take care of myself.”



“Men can be wicked,” Miss Mathews stated as she finished buttoning up the back of her gown. “As you traverse the waters of matrimony, you must be vigilant.”

“You speak well above your years, Miss Mathews. Pray, tell, what is your true age?” Felicia asked with a grin.

“A lady doesn’t share such details,” Miss Mathews said with a laugh.

Felicia sat for the woman so that her hair could be brushed and pinned to the top of her head for dinner. “I am only ten and eight years,” she admitted.

“That I already knew, My Lady. I am your personal maid, after all, and will know all sorts of things about you,” Miss Mathews said with a chuckle. She began to tease her hair into an updo as Felicia watched her in the looking glass in front of her.

“Then you must share such details with me,” Felicia reasoned.

“My Lady, I am twenty and three years,” Miss Mathews said with a smirk on her lips.

“Then certainly you’ll be considering becoming a missus instead of just a miss,” Felicia was quick to add.

“There is a man in this household that has caught my fancy,” Miss Mathews said with a smile.

“My word, who?” Felicia asked with a bright smile. She thought it would be nice if at least one of them found love during their time in the countryside and could actually act on such love.

“Mr Reed is by far the most handsome and charming man I have ever met,” Miss Mathews said in a dreamy voice, sighing as she looked up from her work.

Felicia was startled for a moment but quick to regain her composure. Miss Mathews had been with her during all the painting lessons and would no doubt have spent much time with Mr Reed as she had. “He is very handsome for a common man and has been quite kind to me during the painting lessons. I am sure he would make any woman happy,” Felicia reasoned, looking down at her hands.

“I am glad you think so. I am determined to share my feelings with him before this summer is through,” Miss Mathews declared as she returned to pinning up Felicia’s hair.

Felicia knew that such an idea was reasonable for a girl like Miss Mathews. She was of the same social class as Mr Reed and would be a suitable match for the man. She knew that she should be happy for the maid, who was more like a friend than a servant to her. But there was an unsettling feeling in Felicia’s stomach, knowing she’d just shared a passionate kiss with the man a few hours earlier.

When Felicia was fully prepared for dinner, Miss Mathews guided her through the house to the sitting room. There, she curtsied before

leaving Felicia's side so she could enter the room and be greeted by the duke and duchess.

"Felicia, my dear. You look well rested," Sierra said as she stood from where she was sitting on a pale yellow settee with her husband. She came to Felicia and gave her a light embrace. "Today was such a success that I hardly know where to begin."

Felicia joined the couple by the fireplace; the windows in the sitting room opened to the gardens outside. There was a light breeze coming in through the windows as the sun began to set in the distance. The footmen were in the sitting room, starting to light candles on the wall sconces to cast plenty of light into the room. Felicia took a seat on a pale blue wing-backed chair as she faced the duke and duchess together on the settee.

"Thank you both for hosting such a wonderful gallery event. I feel truly honoured," Felicia said, wanting to be as polite as possible. She knew that Sierra had planned this event just for her, and she needed to show her immense gratitude.

"It is the least we can do for such a dear friend," Daniel said as he took his wife's hand and held it.

"I hope one day I can return such kind generosity," Felicia replied with a smile.

"Felicia has been introduced to Lord Paulson," Sierra spoke up, addressing her husband.

“Is that so?” Daniel asked.

Felicia nodded in reply. “That is true. The earl made introductions to me while I was eating some refreshments in the garden. He was a gentleman, though we had not been previously introduced.”

“Good man, Lord Paulson,” Daniel said with a smile. “I have known him for some time, but he doesn’t seem to be very fond of Town life. That is why he wasn’t present during the last Season.”

“I very much prefer the country life myself, so perhaps he will make a good match for me,” Felicia said, though her heart wasn’t in her words. She had experienced such passion with Mr Reed that she wondered if she would ever feel the same way for another man.

“I could write to him tomorrow and invite him to dine with us?” Daniel suggested, looking between Felicia and his wife.

“Lord Paulson has already expressed his desire to call on Felicia. How about we wait till that happens,” Sierra suggested. “Then as we act as chaperone for Felicia, we can extend such an invitation.”

“You are certainly enjoying your role as matchmaker,” Daniel said with a chuckle. Felicia watched as the duke rubbed his thumb over Sierra’s knuckles, making her blush.

“I simply want Felicia to be happy is all,” Sierra said, turning her attention on Felicia. “Did you think Lord Paulson to be handsome?”

Felicia chuckled as she shook her head. "My dear Sierra, there is more to a man than just his features. I will say that Lord Paulson is a handsome man by all means. But I wish to know the man's character to understand him better."

"And we shall certainly assist in that matter any way we can," Sierra was quick to say.

"But we promise not to be overbearing, either," Daniel added, giving his wife a certain look that caused Felicia to chuckle.

"Yes, yes, of course," Sierra said, shaking her head.

Mrs Tanner came into the room then and announced that dinner had been served. The three of them stood, and Felicia followed after the couple as they made their way into the dining room. She saw an array of dishes resting on the buffet, ready to be served to the three of them.

They all looked to be refreshing for such warm weather. Plenty of pickled radishes and cucumbers paired with a cold soup and roasted ham that had chilled. Felicia didn't realize how hungry she was until the food was served. She listened to the duke and duchess speak amongst themselves, finding their conversation enjoyable.

"In a fortnight, I think we should have a ball," Sierra said. "We have not hosted a ball since we have been married, and I think it would be fitting. Felicia would certainly have a better chance to dance with eligible gentlemen."

“You speak as though dancing is a good way to judge a man,” Felicia teased.

“It was one of the ways I judged Daniel when we were first introduced,” Sierra admitted. “If a man cannot dance well, then he is either too lazy to learn or lacks the talent of good coordination.”

Felicia’s laughter rang through the air as she considered her dear friend. “Oh, Sierra. What a lovely notion. Though I shall be sure to keep in mind what you have shared, I wish to know the man’s mind as well. For if he is a good dance partner, I shall have to discover a different way to judge him.”

“Who thought the female sex would be so judgemental,” Daniel said with a laugh, raising his glass of wine. The ladies followed suit. “To Lady Felicia. May she find the man that suits her, and may that man be ready to be thoroughly critiqued.”

Laughter sounded in the dining room as they enjoyed the refreshing meal. Felicia certainly felt at ease with the duke and duchess and wished she could remain with them till she was married. She wasn’t sure Lord Paulson would be the one for her, or if she could forget about the passion she’d felt that day with Mr Reed.

## Chapter 10

Ernest had his mind focused the next morning. He rose early, took a swim in the pond, and then after dressing and eating a hearty breakfast, he set his mind to the matters of the garden only. He didn't bother with meeting the other servants for the housekeeper's message. He stayed to himself and spoke with his workers only when they started to appear in the garden for the day.

More than anything, Ernest wanted to keep his mind occupied so that he didn't think about what had happened the day before. If Lady Felicia were going to tell the duke what happened, she would have done it already. But he had a feeling that Lady Felicia wasn't a scornful woman. She had been so sweet and kind when they had worked together that, deep down, he knew Lady Felicia wouldn't try to oust him just because he'd told her their passionate kiss would never happen again.

Ernest knew that he would only find relief when Lady Felicia either married or returned to Town after the summer was over. Knowing that she was near, in the manor on the other side of the open doors and windows, made him antsy to catch a glimpse of her. Perhaps he could admire her from afar and not fall into temptation again. He then shook his head at the idea, knowing he needed to keep his eyes down and focus on his work.

Ernest tilled the flowerbeds, pulling the little weeds that were sprouting up after the recent rains. He spoke with his workers, confirming they were still making progress with trimming the hedges, keeping the grass short along the waterways, and ensuring the walking paths were free of debris. Ernest was so focused that he didn't notice the hem of a black gown come into view as he was looking down at the flowerbeds.

“Can I help you, Mrs Tanner?” Ernest asked.

“You didn’t come to the morning meeting,” Mrs Tanner said sternly.

Ernest sighed, thinking he didn’t really have time for the strange woman. He didn’t even dare look at her and watch how her beady little eyes bore into his over her hooked nose. “I have work to attend to, Mrs Tanner. The activities of the household affect me very little. After all, I am not a footman or a maid. I am the master of the gardens.”

“It’s important that everyone understands what is happening within the household,” Mrs Tanner stated. “I expect you to be present for all servant meetings.”

Ernest didn’t say anything in return as he continued with his work, thinking the woman would just go away. But when she didn’t, he decided to move to another part of the garden. Mrs Tanner sighed loudly, finally walking away. All he could hope for was that soon she would start leaving him alone. Her recent interest in him was quite bothersome.

“Mr Reed, there you are!” came a familiar voice.

Ernest looked up to see Miss Mathews coming his way through the garden. His eyes darted towards the music room, the open doors and the curtains swaying in the wind. He was relieved when he didn’t see Lady Felicia standing there as well. “Good morning, Miss Mathews,” he said in greeting. “Is there something I can help you with?”



“I’ve come to let you know my mistress will not be present for her lessons today,” Miss Mathews informed. “She has a dashing gentleman visitor today. She and the duchess are in the sitting room now. I only hope this will be a productive visit for Lady Felicia.”

“Let Lady Felicia know that it is unnecessary for our lessons to continue. After all, the gallery event is over, and I have taught her almost all I know about painting,” Ernest said, thinking now was the best opportunity to relay his message to the lady’s personal maid.

“But she enjoys the lessons so much,” Miss Mathews protested. “I enjoy our time together, as well.”

Ernest studied the young lady for a moment, trying to determine what she might be implying. He noticed the blush in the maid’s cheek, having seen that look before as her lips parted. It was clear to Ernest that Miss Mathews had developed feelings for him.

“Only if the lessons are requested,” Ernest said, averting his eyes.

“I am certain Lady Felicia would like to continue the lessons on days she is not previously engaged,” Miss Mathews said happily. “But I do hope she will make a match soon. She deserves to be married and happy like the duchess.”

“Indeed,” Ernest said, clearing his throat. “Now, if you’ll excuse me.” He walked off, not waiting for a reply, disappearing through the winding paths of the garden, wanting to lose himself for a time. He knew it shouldn’t bother him that Lady Felicia was receiving a visit from a gentleman that would no doubt be a suitable match for her. But after what he’d felt with her in his arms, Ernest couldn’t help

feeling a little bit jealous.

The idea of another man kissing Lady Felicia, holding her in his arms, and experiencing such passions as he had made him feel completely jealous. Regardless of his feelings, however, Ernest knew there was nothing he could do about the matter. If he did want to marry Lady Felicia, he knew that her father would never agree to such a match. He had very little to offer Lady Felicia in comparison to what she already had in life. She would always be a lady of society.

Therefore, he tried his best to push any thought of Lady Felicia out of his mind. Despite his feelings for her and the immense passion he'd felt with her in his arms, he would have to do what was best for the lady and avoid her at all costs.

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Felicia kept her posture straight as she sat on the settee in the sitting room. Across from her was Lord Paulson, having come right at eleven o'clock at the beginning of calling hours to visit with her. She hadn't expected to be called upon so soon but was at least happy that she'd dressed in a finer day gown than what she had planned for that day. She had all intentions of painting that morning until Miss Mathews had announced she'd received a visitor.

Therefore, Felicia was seated in the sitting room with Lord Paulson and Sierra as her chaperone. The maid had just brought in a tea tray for them and served them all a cup of mint tea. There was a fine selection of tarts on the silver serving tray that looked inviting, but her mother had always told her not to eat in front of a man she might consider for marriage.

“Lord Paulson, I hope you enjoyed yesterday’s gallery event,” Sierra spoke up the moment the maid had served each person tea and left the room.

“It was quite wonderful, Your Grace. Thank you for inviting me,” Lord Paulson said with a smile, the teacup resting in his hand. “There was such fine artwork displayed. But it is no secret, Lady Felicia, that your painting outshone all the rest.”

“You are too kind,” Felicia said, taking a sip of her tea.

“It is not kindness,” Lord Paulson was quick to add. “I do believe that you do possess great skill with painting. How long have you been practicing?”

“I have been drawing since I can remember,” Felicia admitted with a smile. “But it is only since coming to stay with the duke and duchess that I have begun using paints.”

“My word, you must be joking,” uttered Lord Paulson, looking towards the duchess for confirmation.

“It is no joke, Lord Paulson,” Sierra said with a smile. “Lady Felicia has been receiving lessons from Mr Reed, the Duke’s personal painter and master gardener.”

“You have certainly benefited from such lessons to have painted such a masterpiece in such a short time,” Lord Paulson said, focusing his eyes on Felicia once more.

"I thoroughly enjoyed the experience and hope to continue lessons to improve my skills at painting," Felicia said proudly. She was curious to know what Lord Paulson's opinion of her hobby was and if he would be as accepting as the duke was.

"What hopes do you have for furthering your knowledge in painting?" Lord Paulson asked as he took a small sip from a porcelain teacup.

"Painting and drawing is just for pleasure," Felicia said with a smile. She watched as Lord Paulson began to cough. He held his fist over his mouth as he tried to clear his throat.

"Hobbies are a wonderful pastime," Lord Paulson said once he'd regained his composure. "A pastime for an unmarried woman. As I'm sure you can attest, Your Grace, that marriage life leaves little time for such pastimes."

"I have found different pleasures in life to occupy my time," Sierra said with a smile, almost making Felicia laugh. She was reminded of the times the two of them used to tease gentlemen during the Season. It was no doubt one of the many reasons why Felicia hadn't received an offer of marriage yet. She had yet to find a gentleman who could be humorous with her and take her teasing.

"Being mistress to such a fine house must keep you on your toes," Lord Paulson said with a nod of his head.

"It certainly does," Sierra replied with a smile, taking a sip of her tea.

“Lady Felicia, tomorrow I am going to be doing a viewing of the gardens and inviting a few families to attend the viewing. I believe this is the best time of year to see the gardens at the Paulson estate. I would love it if you and the duchess and duke would be amongst my honoured guests,” Lord Paulson explained.

Felicia swallowed, knowing that this was the proper way to progress when two people were eligible for marriage. She knew that she should feel flattered for such an invitation after just getting to know one another. Therefore, she forced herself to smile as she looked towards Sierra for acknowledgement.

“We would be delighted,” Sierra responded.

“Splendid. The viewing will be right after the noon hour. Refreshments will be served in the garden. We can only hope that the weather will be kind to us,” Lord Paulson replied with a smile, focusing his eyes on Felicia.

“The Good Lord granted,” Felicia said.

When Lord Paulson took his leave, Felicia let out a deep sigh. It was tiresome to keep her posture so straight and pretend she was interested in the earl. He was handsome, yes. He was wealthy, another thing Felicia should be focusing on. But to her, so far, he was rather dull.

“Well, that went splendidly,” Sierra said as she rang for the maid to take the serving tray away.

Felicia quickly leaned forward and collected three tarts, suddenly very hungry. "We shall see," she said as she took a big bite of a strawberry tart. The flavours were delicious and far more enjoyable than the visit she had just had with Lord Paulson. He had been surprised when they had teased him, showing he was very much high society and stuck to all the rules the Ton oppressed on high society.

"Love still has a chance to blossom," Sierra said with a shrug of her shoulders. "You should give Lord Paulson an honest chance at love. He may be your only choice in the matter."

"You are certainly right," Felicia said with a wicked grin. "Or else my parents might turn me out of their house, and I'd be forced to live with you always."

Sierra chuckled as she shook her head. "My dear, you are assuming I would take you in."

"Of course you would. I would become the governess of your many children and live my days happily creating art and teaching your children to do the same," Felicia replied without missing a beat in their conversation.

"You are not fit for work," Sierra said with a shake of her head.

Felicia frowned as she finished her tart. The maid came in and took the tea tray away while she ate the delicious tarts. "It depends what the work is, I suppose," she said as she finished eating. "If I could paint and draw all day, and people would purchase my artwork, then I think I would be content. I am not the type of person who needs fine gowns and jewels to be happy."

“But could you really turn away from the life you’ve been given?” Sierra reasoned. “Of fine food, the time to do as you please, and having a servant do all the hard work for you? The cooking and cleaning, laundry and running errands; can you imagine what our lives would be like without staff?”

“I suppose you are right,” Felicia said with a sigh. “I do rely on Miss Mathews for much, and I wouldn’t know how to cook at all.”

“That is my point,” Sierra said as she stood. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to let Daniel know of our plans for tomorrow to join Lord Paulson for lunch.”

Felicia waved as she focused on eating the rest of her tarts before she stood. She wanted to finish eating before she went to the music room to continue her lessons with Mr Reed. If her schedule was going to become busy with social events, then she wanted to spend time with Mr Reed as much as she could to continue learning about painting.

Felicia left the sitting room after finishing her tea and went down the long hallway to the music room. She observed a few of Mr Reed’s paintings, thinking they were all quite lovely. Paired with the fresh bouquet of flowers that were in the porcelain vases on wooden pedestals, the hallway was a beautiful reflection of the creativity Mr Reed had to offer the manor.

In the music room, Felicia found Miss Mathews sitting with her stitch work. She surveyed the room and frowned when she realized that Mr Reed was not present. “Miss Mathews, did you not speak to Mr Reed for me?” Felicia asked as she came into the room.

“Of course, My Lady,” Miss Mathews said as she stood and set aside her needlework. “He said that lessons would be unnecessary since the gallery event was over.”

“That is nonsense,” Felicia said with a sigh. “I was learning so much from him.”

“And he is good company,” Miss Mathews said in a dreamy voice.

“Yes, he is good company,” Felicia reasoned. She remembered what Mr Reed had said to her after they had kissed, that it would never happen again. But did that really mean their lessons had to come to an end as well?

“Mr Reed said he would resume lessons if it were requested,” Miss Mathews was quick to add.

“Then perhaps I should seek him out and make that request?” Felicia asked.

“It wouldn’t hurt,” Miss Mathews suggested. “I could come with you as an escort.”

“Alright then,” Felicia said, thinking she would have rather spoken to him alone. But she was determined to continue her lessons. Therefore, with Miss Mathews’ help, they went out to the gardens to search for Mr Reed.



After some directions from the other workers in the garden, they found Mr Reed in the far back corner of the garden as he worked on trimming the hedges. He was working with his muslin shirt unbuttoned, revealing his chest. Mr Reed was such a marvellous specimen of a man that she couldn't help standing and staring for a moment, thinking she could observe him all day.

"Mr Reed," Felicia called out, getting his attention. "I am ready for my lessons."

"Perhaps tomorrow, My Lady," Mr Reed called over his shoulder, not even bothering to look at her. She frowned, thinking he was suddenly very rude.

"I'm previously engaged tomorrow," Felicia said.

"Then it will have to wait till the day after. We can focus on landscapes," Mr Reed said.

Felicia smirked, thinking he was at least able to work with her if he was going to be cold towards her now. "Very well," she said, turning on her heels. She realized now that if she wanted to learn more from Mr Reed, she would have to press her luck with the man she was forbidden to love.

## Chapter 11

Ernest knew that he should avoid Lady Felicia at all costs. However, he wouldn't be able to deny the lady if she requested anything of him. After all, she was a guest of the duke and duchess, and he was the duke's servant. Therefore, it would not be good for his position to deny the lady. Despite how conflicting his feelings were, he had to tread very carefully as he tried his best to avoid her.

Knowing that she would be attending the earl's home today gave Ernest a small relief. He knew he wouldn't be summoned by the lady today or required to do any teaching. Therefore, he kept to himself and his thoughts that continued to circulate in his mind. He needed to be careful how he acted around Lady Felicia so not to encourage any feelings from her despite how he felt for her.

"Mr Reed," came a familiar voice from behind him. He turned to see Miss Mathews crossing the front lawn towards him. Ernest sighed as he stood from where he was working with the hedges surrounding the manor's courtyard.

"Good morning, Miss Mathews. Is there something I can help you with?" he asked.

"My lady is preparing to leave the house with the duke and duchess, leaving me free of my duties till almost suppertime. I was hoping you might walk with me in the gardens," Miss Mathews said with a smile on her lips.

Ernest wouldn't argue that Miss Mathews was a pretty young lady. She had a sweet spirit that he'd encountered when they talked together

over tea. But entertaining Miss Mathews would not only be harmful to her, it would cause Lady Felicia harm as well. "I apologize, Miss Mathews. I do not have the spare time to show you the gardens," he replied, turning from the lady's maid. "I hope you enjoy your leisurely time while your mistress is away."

"I see," Miss Mathews said softly. He watched her walk away, having felt bad for having turned down a good offer. If he were to marry a lady's maid, it would be a good match for him. But with his heart tangled up with Lady Felicia, it wouldn't be fair to try to entertain any other lady.

Ernest looked over to the courtyard as he heard a carriage rolling against the small pebbles. It was a fine vehicle made of mahogany wood and fine red drapes for the riders' privacy, pulled by a team of four horses with coats as black as night. It was a fitting carriage for a duke, one with such intricate details of design and engravings that anyone who looked at the carriage knew that it cost quite a lot to build.

The footman opened the front door of the manor to reveal the duke and duchess. Lady Felicia followed behind them as they made their way to the carriage, where another footman was waiting. Ernest couldn't help staring at Lady Felicia as she walked out wearing a simple day gown of yellow linen.

Compared to the duchess, who was dressed in a day gown of silk, Lady Felicia had certainly dressed to enjoy the outdoors. Ernest glanced towards the sky and saw how quickly the puffy white clouds were moving. He couldn't help smirking, thinking there would be afternoon showers.

As Ernest looked back towards Lady Felicia, he was surprised to see her hazel eyes boring into his soul. Even though it was for the briefest

of moments as she focused her eyes ahead once more, he had felt the full weight of her eyes on him. He was captivated by her beauty, her golden hair, and slim figure. He immediately remembered how she had felt in his arms, the fire that had burned in his body, and seemed to relive the entire experience as he followed her with his eyes.

It was only when Lady Felicia was helped up into the carriage that Ernest finally looked away. He let out a deep sigh as he heard the door shut and secure. The horses let out a whinny as their reins were snapped, causing them to move forward. Watching Lady Felicia leave in the carriage was a good reminder; he was just a servant to a duke, not a nobleman who could reasonably marry the beautiful Lady Felicia.

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Felicia knew she should be looking forward to the outing at Lord Paulson's estate. She'd dressed for the weather in a simple gown that she wouldn't become too warm in, well-aware it wasn't the most elegant day gowns that she had, and certainly nothing like what Sierra was wearing. However, Felicia decided that she wanted to be more comfortable than fashionable.

The vehicle was lined with red velvet that felt plush and comfortable. As Felicia looked at the carriage's interior, she reasoned that it was finer than her parents' carriage and that they would be very jealous.

"What a beautiful day for an outing," Sierra said happily as she sat next to her husband in the carriage.

"Yes, indeed," Felicia replied, looking up at her friend and forcing a smile to her face. "I'm curious to know who might else have been

invited to the earl's home to view his gardens."

"I hear the gardens at the Paulson's estate are very beautiful," Daniel said. "I will have to review them with a keen eye to perhaps gather some new ideas for Mr Reed."

Hearing the gardener's name made Felicia think of the last time she'd seen the man. He'd been cold to her, had refused to even look at her. However, when she had been walking to the carriage, she had spotted him amongst the front hedges. She had looked into his brown eyes for only a moment, but that was all she needed for her breath to be taken away. Felicia pushed those thoughts out of her mind, knowing she needed to focus on her reality.

Lord Paulson had made his intentions towards her clear, having come to visit her so soon after the gallery event. It was quite clear to her and Sierra that the earl would no doubt be a good match for her. Felicia's parents would readily agree, and since her father had offered her a large dowry since the end of the Season, she would become more attractive to men who were looking to marry her.

But Felicia had yet to feel the same connection she'd felt with Mr Reed. She wanted to feel the passion that had come from that one kiss. She had to think of her situation as one of discovery. She must learn what Lord Paulson's true character was to know if she could love the earl and forget about the delicious kiss she'd shared with a gardener.

It was a short drive to Lord Paulson's estate. Felicia reasoned that it wouldn't be a terrible place to live; she would be in walking distance of Sierra's home and could visit her every day if she wanted to. She leaned forward in the carriage and looked out the open window to get a good look at the estate, surprised when she saw a small castle resting in the distance.

The landscape in front of the whitewashed castle was immaculately cut, while a large pond took up most of the space in front of the castle. Felicia was captured by the tall towers, wondering how one would reach the top of such structures. The carriage passed underneath an archway of stone until reaching the large courtyard. "Who would live in a castle?" Felicia exclaimed, forgetting her manners as she looked at her friend.

The duke laughed openly, causing Sierra to giggle. "Lord Paulson is a bit ostentatious," she admitted.

"He took up the estate when it had lain barren for years," Daniel explained. "He truly has invested in restoring the castle and the grounds."

"It is pleasing to the eye," Felicia reasoned. She was curious to know what the inside of the castle looked like. When the carriage came to a stop, the footman came to open the door. The duke stepped down first and turned to help Sierra alight from the carriage. Felicia followed quickly as the footman assisted her down.

The appearance of the castle captured Felicia's attention as she walked through the courtyard surrounded by stonewalls. The front door was a large wooden one that she thought was big enough to let two horses enter standing side by side. As they approached the front door, two men were there to push open the giant wooden door that swung inwards. As Felicia neared the door, she saw that it had intricate designs carved into the wood that looked to be like the family crest symbol. Felicia had never seen such a door before.

The foyer of the castle was a large room that had so much to see that she could hardly decide where to start. The ceiling went on forever

and had to be at least three stories tall. There was a winding stone staircase in the far corner and another to Felicia's right. She could only assume that was how one would get to the tall towers she had spotted outside.

The floor was bare, revealing the many stones situated together to make the floor. On the walls were long tapestries that stretched towards the ceiling. On one side of the foyer was a large fireplace that wasn't currently being used. One thing for sure was that the castle was quite dark and cold. There were few windows compared to the duke's estate.

"Welcome," came a booming voice that captured Felicia's wondering eyes. The door was shut behind them by two men, and she looked forward to see Lord Paulson coming towards them with two footmen trailing behind him.

"Thank you for inviting us," Daniel said as he dipped his head towards the earl.

"It is a pleasure to have you in my home. The others have gathered on the back terrace," Lord Paulson explained. "It's a pleasure to see you again, Lady Felicia."

"You as well," Felicia replied and curtsied and then focused her eyes on the earl once more.

"May I escort you to the veranda?" Lord Paulson asked, offering his arm to Felicia.

She nodded in reply as her cheeks coloured, walking forward to Lord Paulson's side and taking his arm.

"Have you ever seen such a house before?" Lord Paulson asked as he led them through winding hallways of stone with various tapestries hanging from above. They went up a small flight of stairs before turning down another hallway. It was all a maze to Felicia.

"Never," Felicia replied as the footmen ahead of them carried lanterns outstretched to guide them by light. "I fear that I would become quite lost in such a place."

"When I first decided to purchase the property, I too became very lost on occasion. It is an adventure every day to move from my bedchamber to the sitting room," Lord Paulson said with a chuckle.

"What influenced you to purchase such a property? Had there been no Paulson Manor before this castle?" Felicia asked, wondering about the earl's history.

"I was born and raised in the former Paulson Manor in Brighton," Lord Paulson said, his smile falling. "My father had quite a bit of debt by the time he passed away. I had to sell the original countryseat and remain in Town until I could build the family fortune back up. Then, I purchased this property."

"You must be an intelligent businessman," Felicia commented as the hallway gave way to a large room where there were French doors open. It felt much brighter in this backroom that gave way to the veranda.



“I like to think that I am, considering all that I have now,” Lord Paulson said, gesturing all around.

The one thing that Felicia had noticed, besides how dark the castle was, that no paintings were hanging on the walls. Mostly tapestries and wall sconces to reflect light throughout the castle. “Perhaps I could paint a landscape for you to don your halls?” she offered.

“I think a landscape painting would be a lovely idea,” Lord Paulson said as he led Felicia over to an empty table. She glanced around to see several tables set up on the veranda overlooking the vast gardens. There were other families seated around the many different wooden tables, sitting in cast iron chairs with padded white cushions. He seated her in one of the black cast iron chairs before taking the seat next to her. Sierra and Daniel soon joined them while a footman came to serve them tea and small dishes of pickled vegetables.

“Lord Paulson, what beautiful gardens,” Daniel said as they looked out over the stone railing of the veranda to the gardens below. “It is like a sea of roses.”

“I am very fond of roses,” Lord Paulson admitted. “I have asked my gardener to plant each type of roses that are readily found in England.”

“The colour variety is quite lovely,” Sierra commented. “I look forward to my walk amongst them.”

“Do you enjoy the outdoors, Lady Felicia?” Lord Paulson asked

Felicia was about to take a bit of pickled radish but instead set her fork down on a porcelain plate of white and blue. "I certainly do," she admitted. "During these summer months, I find it enjoyable to bathe in the warm sunlight. After all, the winters in England are quite long and cold."

"Do you not worry about becoming tanned?" Lord Paulson asked, a smirk on his lips.

"Of course, I wouldn't want to become tanned. Just think what London society would say," Felicia replied, testing to see what Lord Paulson's response would be. She wanted to know if the earl was the type of person who certainly cared what Society said or not.

"I suppose tanned skin isn't something that is widely acceptable," Lord Paulson admitted. "But seeing as you've brought no parasol, I could only assume you do not fear the mark of the sun on such lovely white skin."

Felicia chuckled. "You have found me out, My Lord. I do not fear the kiss of the sun. Nor the tongue of high society." She finally picked up her fork and bit into the radish. If she were going to consider Lord Paulson as her future husband, then she needed to act more like herself.

When the refreshments came to an end, Lord Paulson walked Felicia around the veranda to be introduced to the other families he had invited to view his gardens. Many she had previously met through Sierra's social gatherings, so it was nice to see familiar faces. In the back of her mind, she couldn't help thinking this was exactly what her parents wanted of her. To be well known in society with a man on her arm that was quite wealthy and widely accepted.

As the party left the veranda and wandered down the stone steps into the gardens, Lord Paulson was at the head. Felicia had managed to further herself from the earl so she could truly enjoy the many flowers. She pretended to be examining closely a lavender rose, taking off her gloves to feel the silk-like rose's texture. Instead, her mind was trying to rationalize the situation she was in. She was viewing the magnificent gardens of a grand estate and was being paid special attention by the owner of the estate.

A man of wealth and title had taken interest in her, had displayed her on his arm and made special introductions. Everything she was experiencing was pointing her in the direction of receiving an offer of marriage from Lord Paulson. Any young lady in her position would be thrilled and doing her best to encourage Lord Paulson's affections. Yet, did she feel like she just wanted to run away from all of this?

"I never knew roses could come in so many different colours," came Lord Paulson's voice. Felicia turned to face the earl, having not heard him approach. "The roses are almost as beautiful as you are."

"That is very kind of you to say," Felicia replied, thinking they better return to the party. After all, this was the second time he had found her alone in a garden.

"You deserve all the kindness in the world, Lady Felicia. I can already tell you are a sweet spirit that yearns to be protected," Lord Paulson said softly, closing the distance between them and raising his hand to brush his fingers against her cheek.

Felicia was surprised by his bold action and knew she should encourage him, but she couldn't help the natural instinct to step away from his touch. "Forgive me, Lord Paulson," she said with a curtsy.

“It is I who should be asking your forgiveness. I’ve been too forward with you, Lady Felicia. My feelings for you caused me to act out,” Lord Paulson said as he bowed to her.

“We’ve only just been introduced,” Felicia reasoned.

“Yet, when I look into your eyes, I feel as though I’ve known you my entire life.”

Felicia wasn’t sure what to do or say. This earl was being quite forward with her, yet she had no previous knowledge of him. Certainly, he was a handsome man and someone she would be well paired with. But she couldn’t help feeling uncertain about his motives. She smiled at Lord Paulson, forcing her lips to turn so he wouldn’t be suspicious. Then, she stepped around him and found her way back to Sierra, convinced not to leave her friend’s side till they returned to the duke’s estate.

“How are you enjoying the gardens?” Sierra asked.

“They are truly lovely,” Felicia said, wondering if she should tell her best friend what had happened.

“But do you think they are grander than mine?” Daniel asked, lowering his voice and leaning towards her.

“No, Your Grace. Your gardens are far better,” Felicia whispered back

to him.

“Come now, Felicia. Don’t encourage my husband. Before too long, they shall both be feuding over gardens. What a tragedy that would be if you married Lord Paulson and our husbands were constantly bickering,” Sierra said softly.

“There is no proposal today,” Felicia reasoned. “No point to make such accusations just yet.”

“Look around you, Felicia,” Sierra said, gesturing around them. “These people were invited by Lord Paulson to see you with him, to be introduced by him. If that doesn’t give credit to the earl’s intentions, then I don’t suppose what more the man could do besides proposing himself in front of everyone.”

“But we hardly know one another,” Felicia retorted.

“Most don’t when they marry,” Sierra said. “He may have made his decision upon seeing you for the first time and will be fast to act.”

Felicia took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. She noticed that Lord Paulson had returned to the majority of the party and was speaking with another couple. But she watched as his eyes continued to make his way towards her, causing her to blush. She felt quite torn over what to do, knowing this was what her parents expected of her, what society expected of her as the daughter of an earl. But it just didn’t feel right. She wasn’t sure if she would ever develop feelings for the man.

## Chapter 12

Candles were strewn across the mahogany table where Ernest sat. His painting for the duke rested in front of him, paints glistening in the candlelight. He was determined to finish in the evening, even though he preferred sunlight to guide his brushstrokes. He figured that the cover of darkness would give him the time and privacy he needed to finish the work he was truly proud of.

Painting seemed to be the only thing that helped Ernest clear his mind. He was so focused on making sure that each detail of the painting was perfect that he couldn't think about his heart's feelings. Nor the thoughts that continued to race through his mind every time he remembered the feeling of Lady Felicia in his arms as he kissed her under the weeping willow.

He was so focused on his painting that he didn't hear someone approach him from behind. He saw the light of a candle from behind him and turned in his chair to see who was approaching. When he spotted Lady Felicia standing behind him, wearing nothing but her nightgown and house robe with a candlestick in her hand, his heart began to pound in his chest.

At first, Ernest panicked, thinking they shouldn't be seen together. Yet, when he noticed how red her eyes were and the puffiness in her cheeks, he realized that she had been crying. Such a sight made his heart soften. "What is wrong?" he asked, setting his paintbrush aside as he stood.

"I couldn't sleep," Felicia said softly. She came to the table and set her candle down, looking at the painting Ernest was working on. "I decided to take a walk."

“And you’ve found your way here,” Ernest said, observing Lady Felicia closely.

“I was hoping to paint myself,” Lady Felicia said. “Even if it was something small.”

“Here, let me gather those supplies for you,” Ernest offered, motioning towards his chair. Lady Felicia nodded as she took a seat, himself hastily moving his own work to bring up a blank sheet. “Anything particular you wish to paint?” Ernest asked.

“No ... not really,” she replied.

Ernest took a step to the side of the table, making sure there was space between them. He looked down at himself and realized his muslin shirt was left untied in the front. Quickly fixing his shirt, he collected his vest from the piano bench he had laid it on. When he was properly dressed once more, he returned to watching Lady Felicia.

“You act as though I have not seen you with less on,” she said with a smirk.

“So ... it was you who saw me swimming in the pond,” Ernest replied, turning to sit on the edge of the table as he watched her start to paint a dark blue background on the canvas.

“I had,” Lady Felicia admitted, her hazel eyes on the canvas the whole time. “So you need not feel modest around me.”

“You are in your house robe and nightgown, My Lady. It is surely you who should be more decent,” Ernest teased. He regretted his words as soon as he said them. He shouldn’t be teasing the woman. He should be quickly retreating from the room and giving her plenty of privacy, but he liked the way he could make her smile.

“I won’t tell if you promise not to,” Lady Felicia replied.

Her words made Ernest think of so many things he’d rather be doing than just watching her paint. But he decided not to continue along that line of thought and instead turned his mind to something else. “Why were you crying?” he asked softly.

Lady Felicia paused in her brushstrokes and looked into the space ahead of her. As Ernest watched, he wondered what memory she remembered as tears came to her eyes.

“My outing to Lord Paulson’s grand estate was productive,” Lady Felicia said as she returned to her painting.

“I have seen his grand castle from afar. I hear that it is quite a sight,” Ernest said.

“The hallways are dark and cold,” she was quick to say. “The only beauty was in the gardens. I assured the duke that the earl’s gardens did not surpass his own.”



“I do appreciate the reassurance,” Ernest said with a light chuckle. “But you have not told me yet why you were crying.”

“Because I have a big decision to make that I don’t want to.” Lady Felicia sighed, a few tears escaping her eyes and streaking down her cheeks. . “Lord Paulson is a good match for me. My parents expect me to marry well, and society expects me to marry either at or above my station. Yet, when I look at the earl, I feel nothing that I want to feel.”

“Should there be any feelings this early in the relationship?” Ernest asked.

“I wouldn’t think, but the earl showed that he had great feelings for me already. I am to think he will propose soon,” Lady Felicia dipped a smaller paintbrush in white paint next, slowly applying it to the still-wet dark blues. t

“Is ... that what you want?” Ernest dared to ask.

“No ... no, I don’t think it is,” Felicia said. “I want more time. I want to spend my days painting, not trying to please anyone. I knew that my dear friend would be trying to play matchmaker for me, but I didn’t think it would happen this soon.”

Ernest felt for Lady Felicia. He knew very little of the ways of high society, but he at least understood that marriage between the upper class was based on convenience more than love. “Perhaps you will come to love him like the duke clearly loves the duchess,” he offered.

“And what if I don’t love him, let alone like him?” she said, looking up

into his eyes. He could tell she was searching his face by the way her eyes looked deeply into his.

“What do you want me to say, My Lady?” Ernest asked softly.

“That I do have the freedom to choose my husband. That I should be able to marry for love regardless of the man’s station in society. That my happiness shouldn’t be based on money and luxury,” she replied.

“Then you would give it all away? The fine gowns, the servants that wait on you, a life of ease?” Ernest asked, wondering if she knew what she was actually saying.

“Perhaps if I fell in love with a man who respected me and who I could respect, then it would certainly all be well worth it,” she said, turning her eyes back to her painting.

Ernest didn’t fully believe what he was hearing. Surely Lady Felicia had no inkling of what it was like to work for a living and not be given every comfort in life. “I can’t imagine you cooking in a kitchen or scrubbing the floors on your knees,” he said, leaning towards her to get a better view of her painting. It didn’t seem to be any specific shape, any well-known scenery or image; the dear lady was simply painting for the joy of it.

“If I became proficient at painting, then I could sell my paintings, hire maybe a cook and one maid,” Lady Felicia said with a smile. “I would live in a small home, so the chores were not so laborious. Even if my parents cut me off and I had no money or support, I would still find a way as long as I was happy and in love.”

“You are a romantic,” Ernest protested.

“I know what I want in life,” she retorted, looking up at him for a moment, a smile returning to her lips.

“Then how are you going to get what you want?” Ernest asked.

“I suppose that I will have to take what I want, create such a scandal that everyone I know will turn their nose up at me, and perhaps even cast me off. Then, without having to bear the burden of my family any longer, I will be completely free,” Lady Felicia said, her smile brightening. “Some people fear scandal. I fear it may be my only choice.”

“I have never met any such lady like you before,” Ernest admitted.

“I’m sure most would say that I’ve gone mad,” Lady Felicia said with a shake of her head. “Or that I don’t know what I speak of. After all, there certainly has to be a reason that society is warned against doing the wrong thing.”

“I suppose the concept of wrong and right are constructed by society of all levels, and then construed when emotion is introduced,” Ernest reasoned.

“Now you are sounding more like a poet than a painter,” Lady Felicia said with a chuckle. She continued to paint emotionally, switching to an even smaller brush as dabs of yellow joined the backdrop.

“I wouldn’t say I am a poet,” Ernest said as he watched her work. “I simply see life differently than most. That is why I am a painter; I can truly see the world for what it is. The classes of society have all deemed what is appropriate, but there will come a time when the working class far outweighs the elite.”

“My word, Mr Reed. You speak like a revolutionist,” Lady Felicia said, turning her eyes on him for a moment.

Ernest shrugged his shoulders, arms folding as he continued, “Only time will tell if I am right or wrong. It is just a prediction,” he said. “Now, you must tell me what you are painting. I fear I’ll go mad with curiosity.”

“The night sky,” she explained as she turned her eyes back on her painting. “The constellations I viewed this evening from my bedchamber window.”

Ernest shook his head, surprised he hadn’t seen that before. There were few paintings of the constellations and more maps of the sky done by graphite pencil and inks. It was refreshing to see how creative Lady Felicia was, so many paintings were of landscapes and portraits, and seeing something like this was incredibly refreshing. “I don’t know this constellation,” he admitted. “Always focused on the ground, what grew in the earth.”

“It is Ursa Major with Polaris as the North Star,” Lady Felicia explained. “It can be viewed in the sky all year round. The North Star is something I focus on when I am up late at night, thinking. Most wouldn’t believe that I understand the stars, that a woman shouldn’t have a higher knowledge of the world.”

“I shall keep that in mind,” Ernest said with a smile. “For when I can’t sleep either, I may look up at the stars.”

The pair settled into a mutual silence, Ernest watching with great interest as the lady painted on. It was simplistic in nature, yet it was as though he was looking up at the night sky right at that moment. The candles situated on the mahogany table were starting to burn down, signalling that it was late at night and both of them should be getting some sleep. “You should return to your bedchamber,” Ernest said lightly.

“I am feeling better now,” Lady Felicia admitted as she stood from the chair. Her house robe slipped, exposing her bare shoulder. Seeing such milky white skin had Ernest feeling as though he was on fire once more.

“I – I am glad you are faring well,” Ernest stammered, pulling his eyes away from the lady. He stood from the table, turning to blow out the light of the candles. The night was warm and the moon high in the sky. He’d be able to make his way through the familiar garden to his own cottage on the other side of the grounds.

“Will you teach me tomorrow?” Lady Felicia asked. “There is so much more that I want to know about painting while I still have time to learn.”

“Do you honestly think that is such a good idea?” Ernest asked with a sigh. “After what happened in the garden?”

“You said it would never happen again, so what do I have to fear?”

Lady Felicia stepped close; one candle lit between them. As she closed the distance, Ernest swallowed hard.

“Do you not feel any temptation when you are around me?” Ernest asked, his voice barely a whisper.

“I feel all sorts of things,” Lady Felicia admitted, reaching her hands up and resting them on his chest. Even through his clothes, he could feel the heat of her hands. He wanted to feel the heat of her body below his as he took her innocence. Such thoughts had his mind spinning.

“But most of all, I feel a sense of calm and peace with you,” she added. “And that’s something I yearn for more than anything. To have calm in my life for the first time would be worth all the effort to get it.”

“My Lady ...” Ernest raised his hand, resting it on the side of her face as he cupped her cheek. She leaned into his touch and closed her eyes. She sighed happily, causing Ernest to feel the need to want always to put her at ease.

“I ... I should go,” she said, opening her eyes.

“Y-Yes, you ... you should,” Ernest spoke in a husky voice. “Before we – b –before we ...”

The sound of footsteps had them both moving away from one another. Ernest stepped into the shadows while Lady Felicia took the candlestick from the table, the candle almost burned to a nub.

“Lady Felicia, what are you doing up so late at night?” came Mrs Tanner’s voice as she came into the room holding a full candlestick of her own. Ernest wondered if the housekeeper ever stopped working.

“I was painting since I couldn’t sleep,” Lady Felicia replied as she raised her chin.

Ernest inched his way towards the open door of the music room, hoping he wouldn’t be noticed in the darkness.

“I heard voices,” Mrs Tanner replied, narrowing her eyes at Lady Felicia.

“Talking helps my process of painting,” Lady Felicia said, stepping around the housekeeper. “Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

Mrs Tanner followed Lady Felicia, giving Ernest the time he needed to slip out of the room and hurry across the grounds towards his cottage.

The night air felt good and refreshing as he hurried along. He couldn’t believe how close he’d been to kissing Lady Felicia again when he’d promised her and himself that he wouldn’t fall into such temptations again. He didn’t want to do anything the two of them would one day regret. Even with the words the lady had confessed to him that day, he was so certain that Lady Felicia wasn’t ready to handle a scandal.

Nevertheless, the idea was romantic to him. That a lady of wealth and

elite status would fall so far from grace to be with a man like him; could her life really be that chaotic that she would give it all away? Though he had witnessed the results of her crying, he wasn't convinced yet of her words. The only thing Ernest could be sure about was the fact that his body burned as though on fire every time he was with her. He longed to be around her, and though he shouldn't, he looked forward to being with her again tomorrow.



## Chapter 13

Felicia had received very little sleep that night. By the time she had returned to her bedchamber, the clock on the wall had displayed it to be past midnight. “I’ll be needing a strong cup of tea this morning,” Felicia admitted as Miss Mathews helped her dress into a pale green day gown of linen. She opted not to wear a petticoat and just her chemise underneath. She was hoping to feel comfortable today instead of confined by her clothing.

“Are you alright, My Lady?” Miss Mathews asked as she finished buttoning up the back of Felicia’s gown.

“I didn’t sleep much last night. I was up late,” Felicia admitted. She wasn’t about to tell Miss Mathews she’d been painting in the music room with Mr Reed. Felicia knew the feelings her lady’s maid had for Mr Reed.

“I will be sure to have a strong pot of black tea for you with breakfast,” Miss Mathews assured.

Though Felicia’s head still felt groggy, she followed Miss Mathews through the grand manor to the dining room for breakfast. The maids were up early, pulling down the tapestries and curtains beside the windows.

“Has the duchess requested for the house to be scrubbed from top to bottom?” Felicia asked her lady’s maid.

“Mrs Tanner has put out the order since the duchess is to be hosting a ball in a fortnight. Therefore, everything must be cleaned immediately,” Miss Mathews explained with a sigh. “I’m thankful to be your lady’s maid at this moment.”

“Mrs Tanner does seem to be quite the strict type,” Felicia said as she shook her head. “I hope the staff won’t be worked to exhaustion.”

“If only the duke and duchess knew,” Miss Mathews spoke as they descended the grand staircase together.

“You don’t think they do?” Felicia asked.

“Please forgive me, My Lady. I mean no offence to the duke and duchess,” Miss Mathews said, lowering her eyes as they walked down the stairs.

“Fear not, Miss Mathews. I always appreciate your opinion,” Felicia assured. When they reached the bottom of the stairs, she paused to give Miss Mathews a moment to speak.

“Mrs Tanner keeps everyone up late that lives in the servants’ quarters,” Miss Mathews said. “I heard Mrs Tanner stayed up well till two in the morning to oversee the cleaning and preparations for the next day.”

“That would have given the staff very little time to sleep,” Felicia reasoned as they began to walk together towards the dining room once more.

“I don’t think that woman ever sleeps,” Miss Mathews said as she shook her head. “I think the staff of a duke should be taken care of better, even if there is to be a ball held.”

“I do agree,” Felicia said. Though her parents were quick to flaunt their wealth, they had always been kind to the staff members. It was an important lesson she always carried with her; the only decent thing she kept hold of.

They parted ways as they came to the dining room. Felicia entered to see that the duke and duchess were already seated while Miss Mathews went to brew her a strong pot of tea. She pushed a smile to her lips as she came into the grand room, taking a seat at the long wooden table of embroidered red velvet.

“Good morning, my dear. How are you today?” Sierra asked before taking a bite of toast.

“I must admit I did not sleep well last night. I was up with my thoughts,” Felicia explained.

“Is there something that is troubling you?” Daniel asked as he sliced bits of his breakfast sausage.

“I have been thinking much about Lord Paulson and the garden viewing yesterday,” Felicia admitted. “I feel as though this is all sudden.”

“Though Lord Paulson might be acting quickly, you have time to make a decision about his character still,” Sierra reassured. “After all, Lord Paulson would have to ask Daniel his permission to marry you, and you could request that Lord Paulson gain your father’s permission as well.”

“That is a good idea if the proposal is quite sudden,” Felicia said, feeling a sense of relief.

“Marriage should not be something you are nervous about, Lady Felicia,” Daniel said. “Marriage for me and Sierra has been a wonderful experience. My best advice is to just go with the motions to see how you feel. It is clear that Lord Paulson is developing strong feelings for you and will give you plenty of opportunities to develop feelings for him as well.”

“I will take that advice to heart,” Felicia said as the footman came to serve her breakfast. She was served a plate of roasted vegetables, breakfast sausage, and poached eggs with a small plate of toast with jam. It was a hearty breakfast that Felicia was appreciative of; her mother would always fuss over how much she loved to eat.

Halfway through breakfast, Miss Mathews came to the dining room with a pot of tea. As soon as it had been poured and cooled, Felicia ended up drinking two cups to help wake up her senses. Mr Reed had promised to teach her today, and she was eager to begin her lessons.

“Felicia, I had hopes to review the details of the ball with you,” Sierra said as breakfast came to an end.

Felicia’s heart dropped in her chest. “I would love to hear your details,” she said with a forced smile. “I have never planned a ball

before and have listened very little to what my mother had to say to the balls she has hosted in the past. Perhaps it will be a good lesson for me.”

“I was thinking the same,” Sierra replied happily. “If you are to marry an earl, you should know how to host a ball for all sorts of celebrations.”

“And what do you hope to celebrate with this ball?” Daniel asked, taking his wife’s hand in his.

“Well, we can celebrate our marriage, the summer months, and our honoured guest, of course,” Sierra said.

“I think those are all wonderful ideas,” Daniel said as he raised Sierra’s hand and pressed his lips to the back of her hand.

Felicia saw the way that Sierra blushed, even though she was already married. She hoped that one day she would be able to feel the same with her own husband. To feel the heat in her cheeks even after they had married. It made her wonder if she would ever feel that way towards Lord Paulson.

The footman came to clear the table as Felicia quickly finished her tea. She and Sierra went down the hallway to the library, a place that Felicia thought was wonderful. It was a large room where the bookshelves reached the top of the white ceiling. A large chandelier hung from the ceiling, being able to house almost a hundred candles to fill the room with plenty of light in the evenings. There were so many books on the shelves that she wished she had time to read them all.

The pair settled down at a small wooden table by a fireplace. The wooden table was made of oak with green velvet inlaid to the top to help keep books and papers situated without sliding off. There, Sierra opened a journal sitting next to a small stack of papers. "I took the liberty of beginning to prepare a list of guests to invite," she said, opening up a page in her journal and handing it over to Felicia to review.

"Are these all families here in the neighbourhood?" Felicia asked. "I do not recognize all the names in here."

"No, not all of them," Sierra answered. "I'll be inviting families from town as well. The Montgomery Manor is surely large enough to house many guests. Therefore, I think the more, the merrier for our ball."

"You know I've never been one for social gatherings," Felicia admitted. "Wouldn't it be better to have a more intimate event?"

"I feel that as a duchess now, I should host large, lavish events," Sierra answered. "And since this is my first ball, I feel it should be grand."

"That is completely understandable," Felicia said, remembering that this ball would have a lasting effect on Sierra's reputation as a host. "Forgive me for not seeing this event from your perspective."

"Think nothing of it," Sierra said with a smile. "I feel some pressure to perform well for my first ball, and that is why I wanted your assistance. You are a more creative person than I am, and I hope you will help me make this ball memorable for all the guests."

“Then I think we need to detail the refreshments and dinner,” Felicia said excitedly.

Sierra chuckled as she shook her head. “I should have known that you would be more concerned about the food.”

“It may be very hard to acquire, but pineapples will certainly be a big surprise to your guests. I’ve heard it’s very delicious and a delicacy,” Felicia suggested.

“Oh, that is such a good idea,” Sierra said as she wrote in her journal.

They talked about the musical numbers that would be played by the small hired orchestra. Then they moved on to the decorations to be displayed in the ballroom. Long drapes would be put over the windows to help reflect the candlelight to illuminate the entire room. They focused on lighting for the ballroom, the tables that would be set up for refreshments, and then ensuring the adjoining sitting room for the ladies would be well-stocked as well.

“As a duchess, you truly have the opportunity to make an impression on society. You could start an entirely different trend if you wanted to. No one would dare stick up their noses to a duchess,” Felicia reasoned.

“I’m not sure I would want to do anything different from the other balls we’ve attended,” Sierra replied nervously.

“Well, let us think about what *would* have made balls more enjoyable in the past,” Felicia offered.

“What would have made balls more enjoyable for you?” Sierra asked. “You were the one that did not enjoy them.”

“Well, that is because I wasn’t trying to show off to anyone,” Felicia said. “I would gladly spend the entire time in this library reading to my heart’s content.”

“But surely you’ll want to show off for Lord Paulson,” Sierra said with a smile.

“Or perhaps another eligible man that will catch my eye,” Felicia said with a shrug of her shoulders. “I feel that the earl is being too forward. I have a hard time believing his actions speak from truth.”

“The ball will be a perfect opportunity to discern that,” her friend suggested.

Felicia turned the conversation then, not wanting to speak about the earl any longer. “What about the flower arrangements?” she asked, looking at Sierra’s notes.

“I was thinking of writing to Lord Paulson to see if we could use the roses from his garden since ours are almost completely wilted for the season,” Sierra said. “It would be so romantic to have rose petals scattered across the floor of the ballroom and down the hallways of the manor.”



“I think that would be rather romantic,” Felicia said with a nod. “But wouldn’t that be a terrible mess for the staff to clean up the day after?”

“Surely it won’t be such an issue for one event,” Sierra retorted.

Felicia closed her lips and said no more on the matter. It seemed that her dear friend was oblivious to the work that went into such an event, and especially the clean up afterwards. She even wondered if Sierra would care if she knew to what extent the staff was already enduring to prepare for the ball.

“My, my, I think that is all for now,” Sierra said, looking down at her notes. “I should summon Mrs Tanner and Mr Crow. There is much to pass on to the housekeeper and butler.”

“I will leave you to it,” Felicia said as she rose. “I’m going to take the opportunity of the fine weather to sketch a landscape for my next painting.”

“Perhaps the one that will be hung in Lord Paulson’s halls,” Sierra said, brightening up.

“Surely,” was all Felicia said before she departed the room. She didn’t quite care what happened with her painting as long as she was allowed to construct it.

Felicia felt more alive making her way to the music room. Though she

understood how important this ball was to her friend, she still did not find any part of planning a ball as exciting as Sierra and her mother had expressed in the past. She certainly found no joy in it and felt a weight of stress from realizing how every detail of the ball would be scrutinized by each guest. Therefore, Felicia hoped she never had to host a ball ever.

A smile came to her face as she entered the music room, Mr Reed standing near the long table with all the paints sitting on top. He was looking down at Felicia's painting from last night, speaking to Miss Mathews beside them. Her lady's maid said something that made Mr Reed laugh, causing Felicia to be rooted in the room's doorway. She'd heard Mr Reed laugh before, but not like that. It was carefree. She couldn't help wondering what they were saying and if she should come back later.

"That is very true. Lady Felicia has a quick wit about her that I haven't heard from any other lady of society," Mr Reed said.

Felicia wasn't sure how to react to his words – if they were a compliment or to tease her. Did this mean they were making fun of her?

Felicia's uneasiness must have been palpable. Mr Reed suddenly looked up and saw her standing in the doorway. His smile quickly faded as he bowed. Miss Mathews turned quickly to see who Mr Reed was bowing to and then curtsied as her cheeks turned red in embarrassment.

"I can come back another time when you two have finished your conversation about me," Felicia said as she raised her chin and folded her hands in front of her.

“Forgive me, My Lady,” Miss Mathews was quick to say as she stayed in the curtsy position. “I promise we said nothing in jest. Good things only.” When she rose, she moved to the other side of the room and took to her normal chair. Felicia watched as Miss Mathews picked up her needlework and pretended to no longer exist.

“Would you care for a walk to the top of the neighbouring hill?” Mr Reed offered. “I could bring your sketch paper and graphite pencil as we discuss the basic concepts of landscape.”

“That will do,” Felicia said curtly. She went to the music room’s open doors and stood there, waiting for Mr Reed to collect the drawing things.

“I can bring out a tea tray,” Miss Mathews suggested, looking to redeem herself with her mistress.

Felicia nodded in reply and watched as the lady’s maid hurried from the room. Once Mr Reed had collected the paper and pencils, they set out of the room together through the garden. “Please don’t be upset with Miss Mathews. We truly were not discussing anything to be upset about. Only your good characteristics and how Miss Mathews enjoys being your lady’s maid. She has seen how Mrs Tanner treats the staff here and is grateful to be stationed with you instead,” Mr Reed explained.

Felicia looked forward towards an approaching hillside, thinking it would be a good spot to sketch. She should have been looking forward to the experience, but all she felt was turmoil inside her heart. Jealousy looked good on no one, but she couldn’t help herself. “I am grateful to have Miss Mathews,” Felicia eventually said. “She is a fine lady’s maid and has been a good companion for me for a long time.”

“Then you should not fear she would say anything negative about you,” Mr Reed protested.

“That is not what I fear,” Felicia said with a sigh.

Mr Reed reached out his hand and pulled Felicia to a stop, surprising her. She looked at Mr Reed with wide eyes as she searched his face for an explanation of why he had stopped her.

“You are jealous, aren’t you? That me and Miss Mathews were speaking together?” he asked.

“That is madness,” Felicia said, turning from Mr Reed and moving away from his grasp. She continued along the worn path in the grass towards the top of the hill.

“For someone who seems keen on the idea of a scandal, I don’t believe you,” Mr Reed said with a chuckle. “What do you have to be jealous of?”

“Perhaps it is the freedom servants have to speak to one another regardless of gender. I wouldn’t be able to approach a man in private because of my status in society,” Felicia reasoned, trying to convince Mr Reed she wasn’t jealous of the two of them together.

“And yet you’ve come to talk to me,” Mr Reed teased as they climbed the hill together.

“I had not known you would be there,” Felicia retorted.

“Yet you stayed once you discovered I was there,” Mr Reed said.  
“Therefore, what are you truly jealous of?”

“Perhaps I think that those of lower society have more liberties to marry whom they want. A servant may marry a servant or above their class if perhaps they have tamed the heart of their master,” Felicia said with a smirk.

“Then you think Miss Mathews is a good match for me?” Mr Reed asked as they crested the hill.

Felicia turned to the gardener for just a moment before she looked out over the landscape, thinking the view was beautiful. “She is a reasonable match for you,” she said, folding herself into a seated position on the side of the hill. “You are both of the same class.”

“That is to say that Lord Paulson is a reasonable match for you, even though we both know your thoughts about the man.” Mr Reed sat next to Felicia as he passed the canvas and graphite pencil once she was comfortable.

“Perhaps my thoughts have changed towards the earl?” Felicia looked outwards, just barely able to make the tops of Paulson Manor’s towers.

“You don’t strike me as a fickle woman,” Mr Reed replied.

“But a woman can change her mind if something new has developed,” Felicia said. He was certainly taking her humour better than Lord Paulson had.

“Yes, that is true. I will not argue that a woman can change her mind. I am simply saying that I don’t believe you have. I had seen that you were crying,” Mr Reed confessed.

Felicia looked down at her canvas, cheeks flushing with embarrassment. For the first time with Mr Reed, she didn’t know what to say.

“It’s quite alright, Lady Felicia, to be jealous of something that isn’t easy for you to obtain that you want in life,” Mr Reed said kindly. “It is human nature.”

“And what if I said that I wanted to kiss you again?” Felicia asked.

“I would tell you the same thing as before. That I won’t do that again with you, despite how I feel,” he said softly.

“It’s not right that two people who have feelings for one another shouldn’t be able to further understand those feelings,” Felicia said, shaking her head. “There are too many social rules.”

“Yet, some rules are for a reason,” Mr Reed argued. “However, the day is certainly beautiful, and I have much to teach you. How about we focus for a time on this beautiful landscape before us?”

“You are right,” Felicia said, forcing a smile. There was plenty she wanted to learn from Mr Reed, and she knew she should take advantage. But she couldn’t help thinking of how she wished she could act on her feelings, no matter how forbidden the notion seemed.

As Mr Reed talked to her about how to capture a landscape on one painting, on how to sketch the basic details first, Miss Mathews eventually joined them with a small tea tray.

“Miss Mathews, you are too kind,” Felicia said, knowing she needed to show some kindness to her lady’s maid. “You went all this way just for me.”

“Of course, My Lady,” Miss Mathews said brightly as she set the silver tray down on a flat part of grass and poured her a cup of tea.

Felicia accepted the porcelain teacup with painted pink flowers and took a few sips of the cooled mint tea. Once she was finished, she set the cup aside and picked up a ham sandwich while listening to Mr Reed’s instructions. Her life might not be as she hoped, but she could still enjoy her time now while she still had the freedom to do so.

## Chapter 14

Ernest found himself between a rock and a hard place. The days leading up to the duchess' ball were spent teaching Lady Felicia the art of landscape painting and the constructive process. For him, it was a thoroughly enjoyable process. They had many wonderful discussions together about art that Lady Felicia readily soaked up like a sponge.

He tried his best to remember the difference in stature between him and Lady Felicia, and that he needed to be grateful for their friendship. It was unusual, to say the least. Something that would be rather uncommon in all other households. To be able to converse freely with a lady was practically unheard of, but he knew that Lady Felicia was kind to both him and Miss Mathews. She never looked down her nose at either of them.

The one thing Ernest knew for sure was that his time with Lady Felicia would not last forever. By the end of summer, she would return to Town, or would no doubt be married. Lord Paulson had been paying frequent visits to the manor. She would often talk to him about those visits, how uncomfortable they were.

"He doesn't joke with me like I can with you," Lady Felicia had complained while they'd been painting in the music room. He'd been finishing up his painting for the duke while she had begun painting the sketch of the landscape around the manor.

"Not all men are humorous. Some are more logical and critical thinking," Ernest had replied, trying to be helpful. He knew that he couldn't readily propose to Lady Felicia or ask her father for her hand in marriage. Therefore, he tried then to wish instead the most happiness for his new, dear friend.



“Then how are we to laugh together, to tease one another into passion?” Lady Felicia retorted.

“My Lady, you are too romantic for your own good,” Miss Mathews had spoken up with a chuckle.

“I just don’t want a boring life,” Lady Felicia said with a sigh. Ernest had watched her paint for a time, seeing her beauty and wishing he could fulfil every wish she ever had. He knew in his heart that they were perfect for one another, that their passion for art was almost as strong as their passion for one another.

Anytime they were left alone, Lady Felicia always used that time to be close to him or even touch his hand. Those few moments together caused him to feel that passion physically. He desired to pull her into a close embrace, but thus far had done well at keeping his distance. He knew that the moment he gave in to her affection attempts, there would truly be no going back.

As the ball drew closer, each day passing as though it would be the last, Ernest tried to make the best of their lessons while remaining chaste. He could tell that his friend was not looking forward to the ball. Miss Mathews had reported of the immense work that the staff had to undergo to meet all of the duchess’ requests.

“She feels pressured to perform magnificently as a new duchess,” Lady Felicia had explained. “Therefore, I am sure this ball will be another lavish affair that does not appeal to me. It is society’s way to show off to one another. And I’m afraid my dear friend has been drawn into society expectations once more.”

“With great wealth comes great responsibility. The duchess and duke sit right under the Royal Family in rank. They will be expected to make impressions on society,” Ernest had reasoned.

“Sometimes I long for a simple life of lower rank not to have to worry about what high society will say about me,” Lady Felicia admitted.

“But think of how hard lower-class life can be,” Miss Mathews spoke up. “You don’t work for a living and can live easily off the income of your father and friends.”

Ernest tried his best to understand Lady Felicia’s perspective on life. She didn’t fit into the normal stereotype of being a lady of high society. She was not concerned with the same things the duchess was, and she yearned for a different life when she lived a life of ease. She may have been happier born a cobbler’s daughter. One that was quite successful and would allow her to catch the eye of perhaps a baron.

Instead, Lady Felicia expressed her frequent concern to him and Miss Mathews when she was present. Ernest could tell she was unhappy with the way her life was progressing, despite the good security Lord Paulson could offer her. He was wealthy, had a grand estate, and supposedly a good reputation. It was all the things that a lady of elite status would want in a prospective husband. Yet, Lady Felicia was not happy with the arrangement, and Ernest wasn’t sure what else he could do for her but help her feel happy while she was painting.

Despite how he felt, and how Lady Felicia felt towards him when they were alone, he knew he couldn’t act on those feelings. He kept thinking how she deserved more than what he would ever be able to offer her. Being shunned by society wasn’t surely something they could endure together.

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“My Lady, you are absolutely stunning,” Miss Mathews said with a grand smile. They were standing in her bedchamber while Felicia stood in front of the looking glass, observing her lady’s maid’s handy work.

“The silk gown is quite lovely,” Felicia admitted as she ran her white-gloved hand over the material. It felt weightless on her lithe frame and hugged her curves perfectly. She felt as though she was wearing a layer of gold as her gown reflected the light from the setting sun.

“With your hair in ringlets, you are like a walking jewel,” Miss Mathews said in a pleased voice. “I hear the hum of the guests. You should join the others downstairs.”

“I should,” Felicia said with a sigh. “But a part of me wants to hide away in my room all night.”

“Lord Paulson will no doubt be expecting to be by your side for the evening,” Miss Mathews reasoned. “Along with the duke and duchess.”

“I know, Miss Mathews,” Felicia said as she turned away from the mirror and towards her friend. “I know what is expected of me.”

“Try to enjoy yourself this evening,” her lady’s maid encouraged. “You are so beautiful, and a ball must be so much fun to spend the night

dancing and dining. Remember all the good food that will be served tonight.”

Felicia nodded in reply, hoping Lord Paulson really wouldn't be by her side all evening. She very much enjoyed tasting different food and wouldn't want to be frowned upon just because she had a healthy appetite.

Miss Mathews led Felicia from her bedchamber and towards the main staircase. Many families were arriving, and their maids were quick to have their things unpacked from the carriage to the guests' bedchambers. The house was alive with activity, candles and lanterns posted up and down the hallway. It was the kind of event that Felicia would normally step away from, but Miss Mathews was right. She needed to support her friend and be present at the ball. Felicia raised her chin, trying her best to prepare herself for the evening ahead.

Miss Mathews did not go any further with Felicia as she descended the stairs. She took each step slowly, her hand resting on the wooden railing as she made her way to the landing. She could see into the foyer and see that many guests were arriving. If memory served, there would be close to a hundred guests attending the ball that evening.

At the bottom of the stairs, Felicia followed the trail of guests in their finery to the grand ballroom. Footmen were standing at the ready with silver trays of refreshments. Crystal glasses contained sherry, brandy, and mint tea for those who wanted a refreshing beverage. There were long buffet tables set up along the side of the ballroom that had an array of different foods to try, including the coveted pineapples that Sierra could arrange for the evening.

Long drapes of silk hung from the ceiling, covering the many windows. The material was similar to what Felicia was wearing; the gold material reflected the light from the candles reflected by the wall

scones and many chandeliers of crystal. Though the sun was setting, the room was as though at noonday with plenty of light.

The many merry voices rang together, echoing off the high ceilings of the ballroom. Rose petals had been strewn across the polished wooden floors and certainly added a romantic touch, though she feared what the clean up would detail for the staff. Most balls lasted well into the night, forcing the staff members to stay up later than normal.

The small orchestra was in the room's corner. It looked as though the musicians were beginning to prepare for the first musical number, and as the ballroom swelled with people, dancing would soon begin. The night would feature six musical numbers, three before dinner was served and three afterwards. There would be plenty to see and do as the night progressed, and though it was all grand, Felicia's heart wasn't in it.

"Lady Felicia," came a familiar voice.

Felicia stilled as she turned towards the voice and saw Lord Paulson coming her way. He was dressed in a stunning black dinner coat, pressed muslin shirt, and a ruffled cravat. He was certainly very handsome with his hair combed to the side. She watched as a few women looked towards the earl with longing in their eyes, another reminder of how grateful Felicia should feel to have the earl's attention solely on her.

"You are beautiful tonight," Lord Paulson said in greeting.

Felicia curtsied as he bowed to her, a complete show of respect. "Thank you," she replied, forcing a smile to her lips. "The duchess suggested such a gown for this evening."

“The duchess certainly has good taste,” Lord Paulson said, gesturing around the room. “I have never seen anything so magnificent before. I was pleased to be able to donate so many roses for this evening.”

“I am sure the duchess appreciates that,” Felicia said, folding her hands in front of her as she tried her best to keep an upright posture.

“Would you care to dance?” Lord Paulson asked.

Felicia would rather be walking down the buffet tables, enjoying the unique and exotic foods prepared especially for the night. She didn’t want to go the entire night hungry just because it was unladylike to eat so much. But she nodded regardless, knowing it was the right thing to say.

Lord Paulson outstretched his arm, and she took it, her hand on top of his arm, allowing him to guide her across the room. Felicia looked around at the other guests, seeing many eyes on her and Lord Paulson. She tried not to let it bother her, but her body started to freeze up anyway.

“Social gatherings are not always my favourite place to be, either,” Lord Paulson said softly, looking down at her.

“Really?” Felicia asked. “You seem so at peace in this type of setting.”

“That is because I have much practice,” Lord Paulson said with a

smile, displaying his perfect teeth. “When I am used to hosting my own social gatherings, I am less nervous when surrounded by dozens of people.”

“I find it hard to relax when in a crowd,” Felicia admitted.

“Then let us pretend that we are the only ones in this room,” Lord Paulson offered.

“I will try,” Felicia said with a smile. The earl was certainly charming that evening. She was a romantic at heart and wondered if Lord Paulson could appeal to her after all.

As the music began, she and Lord Paulson took up positions in the line of couples. Felicia knew all the musical numbers that would be played that night and had mentally prepared for the dances. Being asked to dance by Lord Paulson was to be expected, and no doubt a few other gentlemen.

Therefore, Felicia decided to enjoy herself as much as she could. As the music began, and they stepped through the dance, the Lord’s touch was light, and he guided her easily through. Felicia found herself smiling, remembering how much she enjoyed dancing when she had a good partner. She did as he had suggested and pretended they were the only ones in the room.

“You are a magnificent dancer, Lady Felicia,” Lord Paulson commented.

“Thank you,” she replied. “You are light on your toes as well.”

“I’ve had much practice over the past Seasons. I have found some of the best ways to socialize is to dance.”

“You have worked hard to recoup your reputation and family fortunes,” Felicia said, remembering what the earl had previously told her about his life. “It must have required much socializing.”

“It surely did,” he said with a smile. “It might not be my favourite thing to do, but it has all been well worth the effort.”

“What sort of things do you enjoy doing?” Felicia asked.

“Well, I do enjoy horseback riding, fishing, and leisurely walks through the garden,” he said. “That’s when I’m not in my study going over matters of business.”

“Do you find yourself overwhelmed with business matters?” Felicia asked, curious to understand what his daily life was like.

“Sometimes,” Lord Paulson admitted. “I want to create a legacy for my family and children.”

“That is a noble thing for you to do,” Felicia admitted.

“It’s what a good husband and father would do for his family,” he



said, looking into her eyes. The dance called for them to part as they went through the dance. For a moment, Felicia was faced with a different dance partner that she gave a kind smile to before she was paired with Lord Paulson again.

“Do you look forward to being a mother one day?” Lord Paulson asked, lowering his voice. Their conversation was mostly private as the other couples were focused on one another and the sound of the music.

“I suppose so,” Felicia said. “I think every young lady desires to be a mother at some point.” Having not thought about children of her own, it was hard to answer the question.

“Or suppose you wish to travel after you are married and see the world before having children,” he suggested.

“Really, all that I honestly desire is to marry and settle down in the countryside away from the prying eye of society,” Felicia said. The words were out of her mouth before she had a chance to recover them. As a man of society, she expected Lord Paulson to turn up his nose at her.

“Society really bothers you, doesn’t it?” he asked softly.

“My parents have been the centre of society’s attention for so long that it has become repulsive to me,” Felicia explained. “I wish to be free from it.”

“Our class is often requested to be social creatures,” Lord Paulson

replied.

“Of that, I do understand,” Felicia said as the song came to an end. She was grateful since she was longing for some refreshments.

“Would you care to join me for some fresh air?” Lord Paulson offered.

Felicia considered it for a moment, deciding to accept the invitation. It might be nice to get some fresh air since the ballroom was so stuffy. She followed him from the room. Along the way, she stopped a footman and collected a cup of mint tea, not caring to drink any alcohol when she already wasn’t feeling comfortable.

“The night sky is beautiful,” Lord Paulson said as they stepped out onto the veranda. “Almost as beautiful as you are.”

“You are too kind,” Felicia replied before taking a long drink of tea. “The weather feels nice tonight.”

“Lady Felicia, I would like to kiss you,” Lord Paulson blurted out.

Felicia was so taken by surprise that she almost choked on her tea. She quickly drank the rest and set the glass cup away. She did not say anything as she closed the distance between herself and Lord Paulson, only placed her hands on his chest, wondering what it would feel like to kiss him. She had been curious for some time now if she would feel the same passion with the earl that she’d felt with Mr Reed. If she did, then perhaps she could move on and really set her sights on Lord Paulson.

As he leaned his head down, Felicia slightly arched her back and closed her eyes. His lips touched hers, and she waited to feel something. Anything. Instead, she felt a cold touch, the lightness in his hands as he held onto her shoulders. Then, before she knew it, the kiss was over. She wondered at first if something was wrong. But then, when she opened her eyes, she realized that Lord Paulson had dropped his hands and the kiss was truly over.

“Quite lovely,” Lord Paulson commented with a smile.

“Yes,” Felicia lied as she gathered her cup in her hands. “I will head back inside before anyone sees us.” She didn’t wait for a response as she turned and hurried inside. She felt laughter bubbling up inside of her as she realized how pathetic the kiss with the earl had been. It was like being kissed by a grandparent; it was so gentle and brief. She focused hard on not laughing as she returned to the ballroom and to the buffet tables to get something to eat.

“Felicia, darling,” called Sierra as she picked up a small cube of pineapple on a silver fork and took a bite. “I saw you dancing with Lord Paulson,” she said.

“Yes, we did share the first dance together,” Felicia confirmed between bites. It really was the most delicious fruit she had ever eaten.

“And where is he now?” Sierra asked, looking around.

“I left him on the veranda after we had shared the most pathetic kiss of my life,” Felicia whispered.

“Felicia Casey,” Sierra hissed. “I don’t know what is more scandalous. You admit how the kiss was or that you’ve kissed other men before.”

“I wonder if he was too nervous.” Felicia giggled.

“He was just being a gentleman,” Sierra said, shaking her head.

“Are you telling me that the first time you and Daniel kissed that he was a gentleman?” Felicia asked before picking up a grape and placing it into her mouth. The taste was so sweet that she decided to pick up a handful of grapes to munch on as she walked with Sierra about the room.

“Well no,” Sierra said as they walked.

“There was no zing. No passion at all,” Felicia said between bites of grape.

“And it might come in time, especially if he was willing to kiss you in the first place,” Sierra suggested. The duke was up ahead talking with other gentlemen. They made their way towards him.

“I surely don’t know at this point. I wanted to feel something the first time to confirm what future I might have with the man,” Felicia said as she finished her grapes.

“What I want to know is what other gentleman have you kissed?” Sierra asked in a hushed voice.

“What should it matter if the other man has not come forward to propose to me?” Felicia retorted with her own question, not about to tell her friend what she’d done with Mr Reed.

“Then it wasn’t such a good kiss, now was it?” Sierra asked in return.

“It was the best kiss of my life,” Felicia said with a deep sigh. As she stood with the duke and duchess, she tried not to worry too much about Lord Paulson since the night was still young. Her main thoughts were on enjoying the dinner that would be prepared. Tomorrow she would worry more about what that one simple kiss might lead to.

## Chapter 15

Ernest knew that he shouldn't be in the gardens while the ball was taking place. The sun had set as he watched from the shadows. Most of the windows were covered by drapes to help brighten the ballroom, but he could still peer through the gaps. He had a deep desire to see Lady Felicia in all of her finery. He only saw her wear simple day gowns when they were painting together, and though he always thought she was beautiful, he certainly desired to see her as a true lady of society.

Movement on the veranda distracted him from watching. He gasped as the lady herself stepped out onto the veranda with a gentleman. Jealousy ripped through his body as he balled his fists, thinking this man must be the Lord Paulson she had spoken so much about. When surprise crossed Felicia's features, he stepped a few feet closer to the veranda, thinking he could sprint the rest of the way through the garden to reach her if she needed his assistance. However, when he watched her set her glass down before turning to the man, he had a sinking feeling in his stomach.

The feeling grew worse when he watched Felicia be kissed by another man.

Ernest felt rooted in the grass as he watched the brief kiss. He wanted to challenge the lord to a duel for even considering doing such a thing. But when the kiss ended quickly, and he watched Lady Felicia return inside to the ballroom, he had a feeling that the kiss had not gone as planned. A sense of glee ran through Ernest to see that the kiss had not been a passionate one. He watched the nobleman closely, trying to see how the man would react. He simply stared up into the night sky as though deep in thought before smiling and turning back inside.

Ernest was riddled with different emotions as he took to the gardens. He wanted to reach the music room and numb his mind with his painting. He wanted to forget what he'd seen, the fact that Lady Felicia was destined to marry of similar stature in society. He wanted to rid his mind of the feelings that coursed through his body every time he thought of her.

The hum of the guests mingled with the music from the orchestra filled the entire home as Ernest passed through the French doors. He pushed the sound from his mind as he went to shut it. Soon, he was left with only the sounds of the night, the wind softly blowing, and the music of the crickets.

Ernest settled down at the painting tables and set to finish his work for the duke. With the light from the many pillar candles, he began finishing the last details of the painting of the manor. It was set at the beginning of spring when all the flowers were starting to bloom in the garden.

He wasn't sure how much time had passed as he sat and worked with the paints, mixing perfect colours and adding just enough to create the exact highlights in mind. It was this artistic process he was trying to teach Lady Felicia so she could find some sort of happiness in life one day, despite the man she was bound to marry.

The sound of the door opening caught Ernest's attention. The wall's clock read almost two in the morning. His heart tightened as he watched the door pushed fully open as Lady Felicia stepped into the room, candlestick in hand. She was still dressed in her gown for the ball, the gold-like material shimmering in the light.

"It's quite late," Ernest said, standing to his feet and bowing.

“The guests have all gone or settled into their rooms for the night,” Lady Felicia explained. “And yet I am still awake.”

“I shall be retiring for the night. The room is all yours,” Ernest said, moving towards the open doors to the garden.

“But what if I came to see you?” Lady Felicia quickly spoke up, coming towards him. She’d left the door open behind her, making him a little nervous. The staff would be up cleaning up after the ball, and anyone could discover them even at this time of night.

“My Lady, you should get some rest. I’m sure you’ve had an exhausting night,” Ernest pressed. “It would be quite terrible if we were found together.”

“But perhaps that’s exactly what I want,” Lady Felicia said softly, setting her candle aside on a small table and closing the rest of the distance between them.

Ernest was rooted in his boots as he looked down at the woman he cared for. He wasn’t quite sure what she was implying. “Why me?” he asked.

“Because when I am around you, I’m at ease. I can spend every waking hour by your side, painting and feeling at peace for the first time in my life. You don’t look down at me, tell how I should be acting as a lady, or expect anything from me. You just support me for who I am, what I love, and not as someone who is below or beneath you.”



Ernest's heart was softened by her words. He smiled at her, feeling proud to be able to help her feel so at ease. But even though the two of them seemed to be perfect for one another, he knew her father would never agree to such a marriage. He didn't want to drag her through the mud of public scandal. "I consider you a good friend of mine," he said. "And though I have thoroughly enjoyed our time together, I also know that our friendship cannot progress to anything more. You deserve better, Felicia."

Her eyes widened as he dropped her title and simply addressed her for who she was. The Felicia he'd come to know. "I deserve to be happy. I am only happy when I am with you," she confessed, coming to him and resting her hands on his chest. Her fingers felt like candlesticks against his chest, a fire starting to burn deep within him at her touch.

"I cannot offer you the comfort you are used to," he said.

"I desire very little but to be happy," Felicia replied. "I don't yearn for finery or a large house to take command over. I want to be free to draw and paint."

"This freedom you seek will come at a hefty price," Ernest said, trying to speak reason not only to Felicia, but himself. What he was starting to think about would be pure madness.

"The things we want in life always come at a high price," she replied, searching his eyes.

Ernest was at a loss. Here he had a woman he cared for, admired deeply, and highly respected, choosing him over a wealthy man who

could easily provide for her. He knew he was taking a risk. But if the woman he'd come to love was willing to risk it all for him, shouldn't he do the same for her? He lifted his hands from his hips and wrapped them around Felicia, drawing her near. She sighed happily as she pressed herself onto the tips of her toes as he leaned down and pressed his lips to hers.

The passion he'd felt the last time they'd kissed suddenly returned. This time, it was more intense as every part of his being came alive. There was no doubting now that he and Felicia were destined for one another. Ernest was momentarily distracted from the taste as she began to tug at the buttons of his trousers.

His member sprung alive at such a feeling, realizing just how far Felicia was ready to go with him. He'd thought of this moment for so long, to be able to lay with the woman he loved that he didn't resist as she freed the fasteners of his trousers so that they began to slip from his hips.

"Temptress," Ernest hissed as he broke their kiss and looked into her eyes. "Do you certainly understand what you're asking of me?"

"I'm ready to give myself to you, Ernest," she said huskily, the sound of his name on her lips like a delicious melody. "I want you to show me what it feels like to be a real woman."

"As you wish, My Lady," he growled as he spun her around. He was quick to unbutton her gown till it slipped from her shoulders and fell down her lithe frame. She wore nothing underneath but her chemise, which was easy to tease up and over her head till she stood before him completely bare.

“You are a goddess,” he said as he pressed himself up against her bare back, his member sliding between her buttocks. He ran his fingers up and down her sides till she began to shiver and show goose bumps all over her skin. Then, he cupped each of her breasts with his hands as he leaned down and began to kiss along her neck.

“Oh, Ernest. You make my body come alive like I never knew it could,” Felicia said as she began to pant and moan as Ernest pinched her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers. She began to rock her buttocks back against his member, making him desire every part of her. Now that he’d seen her completely bare, there was no turning back.

“I’m going to worship your body like you deserve,” Ernest said into her ear, nibbling on her earlobe. She arched her back and rested her head on his shoulder. Seeing her mounds in his hand filled him with a sense of excitement. He couldn’t wait to feel the rest of her body.

Ernest turned Felicia around so he could look into her eyes. Slowly, he discarded the rest of his clothes as he looked into her eyes. Soon, there was a pile of clothing at their feet. He watched as Felicia looked at him completely until her eyes settled on his stiff member.

“It ... it is much larger than I would have imagined,” she said softly, reaching out her hands till they were gripping him. He hissed with pleasure at her delicate touch. “Will ... you fit inside me?”

“Worry not, my love. We will fit perfectly together,” Ernest assured, placing his hands on her hips as he enjoyed her touch on his sensitive member.

“You love me?” she asked, looking up at him.

“I would not be with you here now if I did not,” he said with a smile. “I’m ready to risk it all with a woman that I love dearly.”

The smile that appeared on Felicia’s face took his breath away. She had always been beautiful to him, but now she was absolutely radiant.

When Ernest could not take her touch any longer, he took her hands, and together they made their way to the carpeted floor as they worked to kiss each section of exposed skin. They were in a frenzy of kisses till they were pressed onto the carpet, with Ernest settling between Felicia’s legs. He looked to see that her core was dripping wet with anticipation, which spurred him on even more.

“This may hurt for just a moment, my love,” Ernest said softly as he took the head of his member and guided it towards her lower lips.

“Ernest, I love you, too,” Felicia gasped as he pressed himself inside her. Her eyes went wide, and he quickly kissed her as she began to moan.

Ever so slowly, Ernest entered the woman he loved. Her tightness made it hard to move forward, but slowly she relaxed. When he felt her innocence pressing up against the head of his member, he wrapped his arms around Felicia and held her tight as he quickly pressed forward. He covered her whelps with his kisses, trying to keep her as quiet as possible.

“Are you alright?” Ernest asked when she finally relaxed in his arms.

“Yes ... please move inside me,” she pleaded in response.

“As you wish,” he said with a smile as he started a slow rhythm of thrusting inside her. His thrusts caused her luscious breasts to jump. He leaned down and started to trace circles with his tongue around each nipple till she began to arch her back.

“Oh yes, Ernest. Please don’t stop ... I feel as though I’m coming undone,” she moaned softly.

“Quiet now, or we’ll be discovered,” Ernest reminded her. She bit her lower lip to quiet her moans, making him even more intoxicated by her. He couldn’t help increasing his speed, needing to find the release both of them craved. As her moans became louder, he raised his hand and covered her mouth as they both became overcome by the feeling of it all. She bucked her hips as she found her peak, and Ernest followed closely behind. As he released deep inside Felicia, he buried his face in her bosom and grunted till he was spent.

“That was absolutely wonderful,” Felicia said softly as Ernest uncovered her mouth and slowly eased out of her. He laid down on his side next to her and gathered her in his arms, holding her close.

“It truly was,” Ernest agreed, nestling his face in her neck.

“Ernest, I want to stay with you,” Felicia said softly. “I don’t want this to end.”

“My dear ... whatever could we do?” he asked, looking into her concerned eyes. He saw tears and wished he could dash them away. Instead, he simply held her close as she quietly wept. He didn’t want her to cry, especially after all the joy they’d just experienced together.

The sounds of footsteps in the hallway had them both panicking. Ernest wasn’t sure what to do as he looked towards the door, wondering if he could run across to close the door in time. They had just sat up and were reaching for their clothes when Miss Mathews walked into the room. When her eyes fell on them, she gasped and dropped the candlestick she’d been carrying.

“This can’t be,” she said, slowly reaching down to regain the candlestick before it lit the carpets alight.

Ernest pulled on his trousers while Felicia put on her chemise.

“Please, don’t tell anyone,” Felicia begged.

Miss Mathews was white as a ghost as she shook her head. “But you knew how much I cared for him ... how could you do this to me when you have a man just for you already?” she asked, stepping closer as Ernest finally pulled on his shirt and started to tuck it into his trousers before buttoning them once more.

“I love him ... and he loves me, too,” Felicia confessed.

“What is the meaning of this?” screeched Mrs Tanner as she came barrelling into the room. Her greying hair was in a mess, no doubt from ordering servants around all night to adhere to their master’s

wishes. As her eyes fell on their state of undress, her eyes widened, and she covered her mouth with her hand.

“This doesn’t concern you,” Ernest said, stepping in front of Felicia to protect her from anyone else’s eyes.

“What a terrible thing you’ve done. The moment the duke hears about this, you’ll be sent away,” she said, her voice becoming louder and louder.

“There is no reason he needs to be told anything,” Ernest bit back.

“All of England is going to hear about this,” she hissed before turning on her heels and quickly walking out of the room.

“I’m so sorry,” Felicia said quietly behind him. He turned towards her and held her in his arms.

“You have nothing to be sorry about,” he said. “I have no regrets.”

“Ernest, no matter what happens, I will always love you,” Felicia said, tears in her eyes.

“And I feel the same,” Ernest assured. “Even if all of England knows what has happened, I will still gladly marry you.”

“And I would readily accept your offer of marriage,” she replied, embracing him back.

“You should go, My Lady,” came Miss Mathews’ voice. “I will escort you back to your bedchamber.”

Ernest turned to see that she was looking at the carpet by her feet and not up at them at all. Ernest could only imagine how she was feeling to discover the truth about them.

“Please write to me, Ernest. If we are separated to the ends of the world, you must write to me,” Felicia said, letting go of him.

He missed her presence the moment he stepped away from her. “I promise,” he said softly, watching her walk towards her lady’s maid.

Miss Mathews didn’t look at either of them as she turned and led her mistress away. Ernest sighed as he looked about the room, wondering what his life was going to be now. He collected the rest of his clothes and put them on before going to the table to blow out the rest of the candles. He looked down at the painting he’d finished for the duke, thinking he was at least pleased to have completed his artwork for his master.

When the room was transformed into darkness, Ernest left the music room and returned to the gardens. He knew it was late, that he should try to get some sleep. The morning was a few hours away, and there was no telling what the day would bring. There would be no telling what the love between him and Felicia would truly bloom into.



The night air was refreshing for Ernest as he made his way back to his cottage. He sighed, wondering how long this cottage would be his. He did agree with Mrs Tanner that the duke would more than likely turn him out. Therefore, even though his body was exhausted, he started to pack his personal things in the two trunks he had from his father.

His life at the duke's estate had always been a good one. He'd grown up with the duke, had learned much under his father's guidance, and now would be leaving it all behind. Yet, despite it all, Ernest didn't feel any regret or sadness. He knew in his heart that there would come a day when he would leave the countryside and head for Town, eager to make his mark as an artist. It felt as though that day had finally come for him. Now all he had to figure out was how to take Felicia with him.

## Chapter 16

Felicia knew by the first rays of morning light that she hadn't slept at all. She'd sat in bed, looking around the room in the darkness while her mind raced to understand what was going to happen next. Moments throughout the night, she had imagined her mother bursting into the room, ranting and raving about how big a mistake she had made. However, she didn't feel any remorse or guilt. She felt at peace every time she thought about giving herself to Ernest. It had been the best experience in her life.

Thinking about the love she shared with Ernest made Felicia smile as she stood from her bed to see the sun rising in the distance. She was in love, and that man loved her in return. She had all the reason in the world to be happy about that love and find some way to continue loving Ernest. Perhaps they could run away together and start a life of their own. They could paint every day and work hard to sell their paintings.

A knock on the door pulled Felicia from her thoughts. She called out, inviting whoever to come in. When she saw Sierra's tired face on the other side, her heart dropped. She did not look pleased at all as she came into the room and shut the door behind her.

"Felicia," Sierra said softly, coming to where she was standing near the window in her house robe.

"I am sure you've heard by now. Mrs Tanner did threaten to tell," Felicia said, looking at her friend.

"Yes, we were awoken not too long ago to hear what had happened,"

Sierra said with a sigh. "The household knows, and no doubt the servants will be telling their masters."

"I don't care," Felicia said as she shook her head and looked outside her bedchamber to the gardens below. "I should be able to love who I want. I experienced something wonderful and shouldn't be punished for it. After all, my parents did similarly with no consequences."

"But your parents are married ... and discreet," Sierra said. "You were discovered."

"Then I should oust my parents to become just like them," Felicia scoffed.

"Which would leave your family's name in tatters and you without any hope of marrying a reputable man," Sierra retorted.

"I don't want to marry a reputable man. I want to marry Ernest. He's the only person I've ever been around where I can completely be myself," Felicia said. "He is the man I love, and I will gladly marry him."

"I feel responsible for facilitating this," Sierra said, catching Felicia's attention.

"I am the one who pursued him," Felicia was quick to say. "He fascinated me from the beginning. We had kissed once before, something that I never knew I could experience. And once I felt that passion, that spark, I couldn't get it out of my mind."

“I felt the same way with Daniel,” Sierra admitted. “Once we had kissed at a ball, I knew that he was the one for me. Though we faced our own opposition with one of his previous courtships, we eventually were able to be together.”

“But your parents accepted the match,” Felicia reasoned. “Mine will never accept a gardener as a son-in-law.”

“Then you must decide, Felicia. Decide now if you’ll fight for a future with Mr Reed,” Sierra said, determination in her voice.

Felicia didn’t hesitate. “I love him, Sierra. I want to be his wife and start a family with him. I would gladly give up everything my family has to offer to express my love freely to him. Yes, I would fight for a future with him.”

“Good,” Sierra said, a light smile coming to her face. “Now, I would suggest not leaving this chamber until the ball guests have left for the day and the manor is as it should be. I promise I will be back shortly.” Sierra mustered up a small smile for her friend, hoping to reassure her.

“Will I get to see him?” Felicia asked as Sierra left her side and went towards her bedchamber door.

“That I can’t promise,” Sierra said as she reached for the door. “I would get some rest.”

With that, Sierra left her room and closed the door behind her. Felicia turned back to the window with a sigh. She wanted to see Ernest to know that he was well. As she thought about her time together with Ernest, she felt warm all over. Knowing that those feelings stemmed from a place of love, she longed to be with him again. As the day began, she wanted to take to the gardens and locate him. She wanted to be in his arms once more.

When a knocking came on the door once more, Felicia called over her shoulder for the person to enter. This time a maid she did not recognize came into the room and began to turn down her bed.

“Who are you?” Felicia asked, folding her arms over her chest.

“My name’s Miss Drought,” the young lady said with a curtsy before she went to fold her bed.

“Where is Miss Mathews?” she asked next.

“Miss Mathews has taken her leave of the house.” Miss Drought tucked back a strand of her long brown hair before moving on to Felicia’s wardrobe. All the while, Felicia was stunned as she watched the woman work. It was hard to believe that Miss Mathews would leave her after all these years together.

Felicia said no more as Miss Drought prepared an outfit for her, then drew a bath to help her wash up and prepare for the day. If she was going to be confined to her bedchamber for a good bit of the day, she reasoned she better find something suitable to do. She thought of her parents, and knowing how far and fast gossip could spread once the servants learned of juicy news, Felicia reasoned it wouldn’t take long for her parents to discover what had happened the night of the

duchess' ball.

Once Miss Drought went to make up a breakfast tray for her, Felicia settled down at the writing desk in her room below the window. She pulled a sheet of writing paper from the narrow wooden drawer, gathering a writing quill and inkpot from the top shelf. Then, once her quill was sharpened, she dipped the nib into the inkwell and began to write her letter to her mother.

*Dear Mother,*

*Whether you read my own words or that of one of your confidants, you will come to know that I have slept with a man. He is a man that I love, that I long to marry. I have no regrets about my decision and seek you and father's permission to soon marry him. His name is Mr Reed, and I know we will be very happy together. He is a wonderful painter. I shall remain with the duke and duchess till I receive your reply,*

*Felicia Casey*

As Felicia let the ink dry on the writing paper, she wondered if she should somehow rewrite it. It was quite straight forward and would no doubt give her mother quite the heart palpitations upon learning what she'd done. But knowing how many lovers her mother and father had taken, she did not think they could stick up her nose at her. After all, she was in love. This was something she was certain her parents had never felt before.

When Miss Drought returned with a breakfast tray, she folded up the letter and sealed it with hot wax. When it was cooled, she gave it to Miss Drought to have it posted for the day before settling down at a table near the empty fireplace to enjoy her breakfast. "Miss Drought,

can you please let me know when the other families have left the manor?" Felicia asked, turning towards the woman as she stood at the ready.

"Of course, My Lady," Miss Drought replied with her head bowed. Already Felicia was missing the company of Miss Mathews and felt very depressed that her friend had left. It made her wonder if Sierra would do the same thing before the day was through.

Felicia ate slowly, trying to imagine what was about to happen. She knew that Sierra was mindful of her reputation as a duchess. Did that mean she would be quick to send Felicia away if the scandal spiralled out of control? Had everyone who had stayed the night at the manor really already learned about her intimate act with Ernest? "Miss Drought, what do you know of what transpired last night?" she asked.

"What do you mean, My Lady?" she asked nervously.

"Miss Drought, you do not need to be timid with me. I wish to know what the servants are gossiping about today," Felicia explained.

"It is no secret what transpired between you and Mr Reed," Miss Drought admitted, her cheeks turning red in embarrassment. "Mrs Tanner was quite fancy of Mr Reed, so she is quite beside herself."

"But isn't Mrs Tanner quite old to have set her sights on a strapping man like Mr Reed?" Felicia retorted.

Miss Drought was quick to try and catch her laughter.

"I will take that laughter as you very much agree with me." Felicia chuckled. "Come, Miss Drought. Won't you join me?"

"I've never been asked to join a lady while she eats," Miss Drought said, looking unsure.

"I will be quite lonely today since the duchess has instructed me to remain in my room. More so, I don't think I'll be permitted to see Mr Reed. I would like some sort of company," Felicia explained.

"I will post your letter and return shortly," Miss Drought replied as she curtsayed and hurried off.

Once the door was shut, Felicia finished eating her breakfast before deciding to sit at the writing desk and construct another letter.

*My dearest Ernest,*

*I hope this letter finds you well. The duchess has told me that I must remain in my room till all the guests leave. I miss your presence already and long for the day we can be together. I have written to my parents to ask them for their permission for us to marry immediately. However, if they don't agree, then I shall surely run away with you.*

*Yours truly in every way,*



Felicia was far more pleased with this letter by the time she finished it. Once the ink dried, she folded and sealed it just in time for Miss Drought to return. "Miss Drought, will you please take this letter to Mr Reed for me?" she asked.

"My Lady, he is meeting with the duke at this moment," she explained, her voice soft.

"Oh," Felicia said, looking down at the letter. "I am not sure what the duke is going to decide. So, if you could, would you give this letter to Mr Reed as soon as he is finished with the duke? I will wait to hear what has happened when you return."

"Yes, My Lady. I will return as soon as I have delivered this letter and will report what I learn about Mr Reed's fate," Miss Drought said, a small smile on her lips.

"Thank you, Miss Drought. You are a saint," Felicia said as the young lady rose to her feet once more. She said a silent prayer as the lady's maid left the room and looked towards the window, to the gardens below that she wished she could take to in order to ease her thoughts. She wanted to know what would happen to Ernest and what the duke would eventually decide.

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"Ernest, I can hardly believe what has been told to me," the duke said, a glass of brandy in hand.

“And what exactly has been told to you?” Ernest asked as he picked up his own. He was surprised that the duke had addressed him so formally. Yet, he knew they had spent much time together when they had been younger. Now, in his study, it seemed as if something was shifting between them. Something was changing.

“Mrs Tanner is in a tizzy, yelping that she walked in on you and Lady Felicia in an undignified position,” the duke said, draining the rest of his cup before pouring another thimble full.

“Lady Felicia and I both had clothing on by the time Mrs Tanner walked in. Though, we hardly had any clothes on when Miss Mathews discovered us on the floor of the music room,” Ernest said, deciding to be frank and upfront with his master.

The duke cursed, running his fingers through his hair. “You are my oldest friend, Ernest. Though we have not been able to talk peer to peer since I came of age, I have not forgotten my boyhood. I do not wish to send you away.” The Duke looked uncomfortable, exhausted, as though he had not slept any. Ernest himself had been up all night packing his things and expecting the inevitable.

“My things are already packed and ready to go,” Ernest said. “I finished the last painting you commissioned me to make. I shall go to Town, introduce myself under a new name, and do what I was destined to do. I shall open my own gallery and become a commissioned painter.”

“Do you believe you can really start your life over in Town?” the duke asked, concern riddled across his face.

“I have never been to Town before, and I have no relations there. The only people that know me are the ones in this house. I have saved up a small fortune to allow me to rent a space suitable for my needs,” Ernest explained.

“You will need references and recommendations,” the duke reasoned.

“Then write them for me. Refer to me as Mr Edward Simmons. I will be a farmer’s son who has just sold the farm to follow my passion as a painter. I could have been one of your tenants,” Ernest suggested.

“I think people would figure out who you were if I wrote you a reference. Everyone here knows that you have painted all the portraits and landscapes in this house. If you must go on under a different name, it is best you are not connected to me at all,” the duke said, shaking his head. “Why couldn’t you have just kept your hands to yourself?”

“Like the way you keep your hands to yourself with the woman you love?” Ernest teased.

The duke chuckled, breaking the tension in the room. Ernest picked up his glass of brandy and sipped it some more. He appreciated the liquor but wanted to have a clear mind.

“So, you love her?” the duke asked.

Ernest nodded. “I certainly do. And, she loves me in return.”

“I wish there was more I could do for the two of you. I doubt I could convince her father to agree to a marriage,” the duke said with a sigh.

“I will go to Town and become settled with painting and getting commissions. When I have gained some reputation, I shall write to her father and ask for her hand in marriage,” Ernest said, having made up his mind. “If Felicia can wait just a little bit for me, then I will be able to provide for both of us.”

“That’s the thing, Ernest. You’re playing with fate. Relying on the ‘ifs’ and ‘buts’ of the future,” the duke said, sitting up in his chair and facing him. “You need security now.”

“I do,” Ernest said with a smile, finishing his glass of brandy. “I know that Lady Felicia loves me and that she’s willing to be with me. I just need to provide a future for us.”

“I sure hope you know what you are doing,” the duke said with another shake of his head. “You must write to me under your new name once you are settled in Town. Let me know how you are doing and what I can do to help. I wish to see you happy, Ernest. I promised your father I would always look out for you.”

“You did?” Ernest asked, surprised to hear this.

“On his deathbed, when I visited him, I promised him that I would always make sure you were taken care of in the world and never left alone. I feel as though I am failing that promise by sending you away from your home,” the duke said, looking defeated as his eyes looked

away from Ernest and to the empty fireplace.

“You have been a good friend to me all my life. You have given me more than any other servant in this house. Now, because of your kindness, I get to fulfil my dreams of being a renowned painter in Town. It might not have been the way I had envisioned, but now more than ever, I am determined to find success on my own. I have a woman I want to marry and a family to support one day,” Ernest said with confidence.

“You sure look determined for a man who is facing a lot of scandal,” the duke said with a chuckle. “I admire you for that. If you need any financial support, please write to me.”

“As soon as I am settled in Town, I shall write you,” Ernest agreed. “But I really should get going, for the lady’s sake.”

Ernest stood to his feet, feeling more determined than ever. He needed to make his biggest dream come true to be worthy of Felicia, even if he needed to start his life over.

The duke stood and shook hands with Ernest before saying his final farewells. Ernest could tell this was a hard parting for Daniel and tried to smile for his friend as he pulled open the study door and stepped outside. He was surprised when he was faced with Miss Drought, one of the housemaids.

“Mr Reed, My Lady has asked that I give this letter to you,” Miss Drought quickly said, pressing it into Ernest’s hand.

“Thank you, Miss Drought. Please let the lady know that I am leaving,” Ernest replied, pocketing the letter and stepping forward.

“Leaving? The lady is going to be devastated if you just leave,” Miss Drought said, hurrying after him as he made his way through the back of the house towards the nearest door leading to the gardens. He had a small cart and his horse waiting for him by his cottage, the cart packed with his trunks so he could head straight away to Town.

“It’s the best thing for us right now. Her father isn’t going to accept my marriage offer, so I need to become worthy of that. I can’t do that here,” Ernest said over his shoulder, not stopping at all to address the maid properly. “What happened to Miss Mathews.”

“She left, sir,” Miss Drought explained, stepping out the back door with Ernest. That had him stopping to face the young woman. “She was heartbroken.”

“But I never encouraged her,” Ernest said, shaking his head. “This is all a mess.”

“If you leave the lady now, she’ll feel completely abandoned by those she once trusted,” Miss Drought said, placing her hands on her hips.

“Tell her that I am terribly sorry, that I shall write to her and make a way for us to be together,” Ernest said, turning from the maid and hurrying through the garden. He was pleased to hear that no one was following him.

As soon as he reached his cottage, his horse and cart still waiting for

him, he pulled himself up onto the driver's bench and gave the horse a small tap on the rump with the reins to get him moving. Ernest didn't look back over his shoulder as he followed the narrow lane to the main road. He was leaving the cottage Daniel had given to him when his father died. He was leaving the only place he'd ever known to be his home, and he was leaving the woman he loved behind.

Ernest knew that he was making the right decision. He set his sights on Town, making a good name for himself now that he had plans to reimage his character, and one day he would be a renowned painter. Then, he would be able to marry Felicia and make all things right again.

## Chapter 17

“I don’t understand,” Felicia said as Miss Drought returned to her bedchamber.

“Mr Reed left as soon as he finished meeting with the duke. I did give him your letter before he left,” Miss Drought explained. “And another letter has arrived for you as well.”

Felicia didn’t know what to think as she stared down at the carpet. Miss Drought came to her and extended the letter towards her. Eventually, she weakly reached for it and took it from the maid. As she laid it in her lap, she flipped it over, to the wax seal and did not recognize the seal at all. Felicia took several deep breaths before pulling at the seal and breaking it before opening the letter fully.

*Lady Felicia Casey,*

*I wish to fully express my sentiments. I will not be offering you marriage after learning what has transpired last night. I shall not pay you any more visits and ask that you do not pursue me, either.*

*Lord Paulson*

Felicia felt very little pain at the earl’s words as she crumpled up the letter and tossed it into the empty fireplace. She was more concerned with what Miss Drought had told her about Ernest. “Did he say where he was going?” Felicia asked, looking back up at the maid.



“From what I understand, he wants to be worthy of you, My Lady. I suppose he is going to try to gain fame with his paintings,” Miss Drought reasoned.

“His name is tarnished already by the rumours that will mill about for months,” Felicia said, shaking her head. “Town is not a good place for either one of us.”

“I’m sorry, My Lady. I do not know what else to tell you,” her maid said.

“I wish to speak to the duke and duchess. I must know what was said by Ernest this morning,” Felicia said, feeling panicked. She didn’t like the thought that he’d left her without taking the time to speak to her. Whatever he was planning, she would have readily agreed to go with him and be married along the way. Surely, her parents would write to her soon and give her permission to marry if only to avoid a major scandal. She never wanted to be apart from Ernest again.

“I will carry your message to the mistress of the house,” Miss Drought said before she curtsied and left the room.

Felicia wasn’t sure what to do as she stood and began to pace the room. She’d hardly eaten her breakfast, wasn’t feeling quite like herself, and everything she had felt last night seemed to be vanishing from her memory. Had she given herself to a man who truly did not love her? For if Ernest did love her, surely he wouldn’t leave her so suddenly without speaking to her.

Tears came to Felicia’s eyes as she walked around her room, feeling

more irritated by the moment. She didn't want to remain in the room; she wanted to find Ernest and demand he talk to her about what he was planning. Or, at least, her dear friend should come to console her. Did this silence mean that Sierra was getting ready to turn her out as well? The very idea made her shiver. She didn't want to return to Town to her parents' home. She wanted to marry Ernest and live a happy life finally.

Her bedchamber door eventually opened, giving Felicia a moment of hope that perhaps Ernest had returned to her. Instead, Sierra pushed the door all the way open before coming to greet her.

"You look so startled," Sierra said as she furrowed her brow. "As though you've seen a ghost."

"I'm not myself," Felicia said, shaking her head, and she raised her fingers to her head and started to massage her temples.

"Should I call for a doctor?" Sierra asked, coming to her side.

"No ... I'm sure I'll be fine ... just my nerves," Felicia replied.

"Come, sit. Perhaps you should even lay down," Sierra said. "After my first night with Daniel, I spent the day resting. Your body needs rest after experiencing that for the first time."

"Is it true that he's left?" Felicia asked as Sierra eased her down to the side of her bed till they were both sitting side by side.

“Yes, Mr Reed left swiftly this morning after being dismissed by Daniel. The two were rather close, so it was a very hard thing for Daniel to do,” Sierra explained. “From what I’ve been able to gather, Mr Reed is moving to Town with his few possessions.”

“But, he said he loved me,” Felicia reasoned, tightening her hands into fists at her side. “Why didn’t he ask me to go with him?”

“I don’t know,” Sierra said softly. “Sometimes men will say things to get what they want from a woman.”

“No, I will not think that way of him,” Felicia said, shaking her head as tears filled her eyes. “It can’t be true.”

“I’m so sorry this happened to you,” Sierra said, wrapping her arms around Felicia as she sobbed. Felicia felt so terribly heartbroken that she didn’t know what to think. Therefore, she simply cried in her friend’s arms.

“Felicia, just lay down for a bit,” Sierra encouraged when Felicia began to hiccup. Felicia felt so overcome by emotions that she just listened to her friend’s guidance as she was let go and coaxed to lay down.

“You’re not going to send me away, are you?” Felicia asked amidst her tears.

“No, I am not,” Sierra assured. “But once your parents find out what has happened, they will no doubt send for you. I recommend

preparing to travel in a few days.”

“I don’t want to go back there,” Felicia cried. “I just want to be with the man I love.”

“Shh, now, my dear. You need your rest. You’ve been through a terrible ordeal,” Sierra soothed, running her fingers through Felicia’s hair. It took quite some time for Felicia to quiet down enough that her body relaxed underneath Sierra’s gentle touch. Eventually, exhaustion took over Felicia and pulled her down into a deep sleep.

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Felicia felt numb as the carriage rolled over the cobblestones of Town. She had felt numb ever since leaving Sierra and Daniel. She had found so much peace during the summer at their home, but also much sadness. Felicia had come to convince herself that what she had felt for Ernest had all been a hoax, and she had been taken advantage of in the end. She felt such a fool and now would need to endure the torment of her parents.

When the carriage came to a stop outside her parents’ townhouse, Felicia looked up at the house and felt her stomach bind into knots. She didn’t want to go inside the house and face her parents. Yet, she knew that she couldn’t stay in the carriage forever. She was so worn from travelling, from crying that she just needed to lay down for a long time.

“Are you ready to go inside, My Lady?” Miss Drought asked. She had travelled with Felicia, ensuring she was well cared for during her travels to Town. She would soon be returning to her master’s house, and Felicia would be assigned another ladies’ maid.

“I am not ready, but it can’t be avoided any longer,” Felicia said. She heard the sound of thunder overhead, thinking the weather was perfect for the way she was feeling. It was the sign of summer coming to an end and the cold weather of fall coming soon.

The carriage door was opened by the footman, who then held out his hand for Felicia. She didn’t bother taking the man’s hand as she stepped down herself from the carriage using the handles on the side of the carriage. After what Ernest had done to her, she doubted she’d ever trust a servant again and wouldn’t even look at another man again the way she had for the one that had captured her heart.

Felicia headed up the walkway to the front door, the white door looming ahead of her. As she neared, it was opened for her by the butler. She peered into the perfectly decorated foyer, searching for any signs of her parents.

“Welcome home, My Lady,” the butler greeted with a bow as she entered. She nodded towards him, pulling off her bonnet and gloves that she handed to Miss Drought as the maid followed closely behind her. “Your parents are in the drawing room.”

Felicia took a deep breath before she walked down the hallway, the white marble floors reflecting her likeness. Fresh flowers were in a porcelain vase on a wooden pedestal near the drawing room door. She wanted to smash the vase to the floor, the sight of flowers making her remember the man that had broken her heart. Instead, she gathered all the courage she had left as she walked into the drawing room. Her eyes instantly settled on her parents sitting on opposite sides of the settee, both of them pretending to read the paper.

“Finally, you’ve arrived,” her father said, tossing the newspaper aside on a wooden table as she came to stand in front of them. She wanted this conversation over so she could retire to her bedchamber as soon as possible. Her mother slowly folded her newspaper and set it down on her lap before focusing her cold blue eyes on Felicia.

“What do you have to say for yourself?” her mother asked, her voice stern and riddled with ice.

“I could ask the same for the both of you,” Felicia said, folding her arms and staring at her parents. If they were going to judge her, she would give it straight back to her parents. She was already in deep trouble. What could a little more really hurt? She watched as both of her parents looked at one another before looking back at her.

“I don’t understand what you are referring to,” Lady Casey said, tucking back a fallen curl of golden hair.

“I know about the lovers both of you have taken,” Felicia stated, looking from her mother to her father. “I have heard the sounds of your lovemaking at night, have glimpsed strangers leaving in the wee hours of the morning, and heard your hushed promises while I am capturing the morning light for my drawings.”

Felicia watched as her mother’s face turned a deep red, as her father looked away from her as he started to run his fingers through his dark brown hair. Felicia watched both of them, seeing the pure embarrassment on their faces, but they didn’t seem to be surprised.

“I have learned my lesson,” Felicia stated. “I assure you nothing like this will ever happen again. But if you are going to judge me, to scorn me, understand that what the two of you have done for years does not

compare to my one sin.”

“Then this must mean you have no intentions of marrying the man that has ruined you,” her mother scoffed. “Your letter preceded you just a few days ago, making us think you might be running away with the man.”

“My presence should speak louder than written words,” Felicia snapped.

“How dare you speak to your parents in such a way, you insolent girl,” her father snapped at her. “You’re one sin is known by all of Town.”

“And how do you know that yours are not?” Felicia asked in reply. “I think the only reason the Ton keep hushed for so long is that both of you are married.”

“Enough of this. Felicia, you may retire to your bedchamber,” Lady Casey said, dismissing her with a wave of the back of her hand.

Felicia didn’t hesitate in leaving the room. The moment she stepped into the hallway, she heard the hurried whispers of her parents and couldn’t help stopping in her tracks to listen to them.

“How long do you think she’s known?” her mother asked.

“Does it really matter how long?” her father replied. “She could have

ruined us long ago but chose not to.”

“Then I suppose our plan to marry her off to the highest bidder isn’t going to work any longer,” Lady Casey whispered. “No one is going to want to marry her now. So, what are we going to do?”

“Perhaps next Season, all of this will blow over, and she’ll have a chance,” she heard her father say. “She needs to marry a decent man and move on with her life.”

“And we haven’t heard from this man that she was with. I guess he used her in the end,” Lady Casey scoffed. “I suppose that’s what we get in the end.”

“We’ve only done what others have in our possession,” Lord Casey hissed. “No more of your ranting.”

When Felicia heard her father’s footsteps against the sitting room’s hardwood floors, she headed down the hallway and stepped into the dining room, confident her parents wouldn’t be heading in that direction. She hid behind the half-closed door and waited for those footsteps to fade away.

She heard another door close at the end of the hallway, thinking her father had gone into the study. Moments later, soft footsteps went by. She could only assume they were her mother’s. And when the front door opened and closed, Felicia was certain her mother had gone out to do a bit of shopping.

Felicia felt as though the hallway was clear as she stepped back into



the hallway and made her way quickly to the stairs. She hurried up them to her bedchamber and was pleased to see that Miss Drought was putting away her things into her wardrobe.

“I shall be finished shortly and will be heading back to my master’s home,” Miss Drought said as Felicia shut the door behind her.

“I wish you could stay on as my maid,” Felicia said. “You have been a good companion for me.”

“I have enjoyed my time with you as well, but it is best that I return home. I have a family of my own to think of,” Miss Drought said. Felicia nodded, thinking she hadn’t really taken the time to learn more about Miss Drought.

As soon as her trunks were unpacked and Felicia had been changed into a day gown, Miss Drought said her goodbyes before leaving. With the door closed, she looked around her familiar room.

So many thoughts were running through her mind as she took in the look of her room. Everything was as it was from when she’d last been in this space before summer. Now, she felt as though she was trapped once more in Town. She was under her parents’ roof and their control once more.

Unable to think what else to do, Felicia went to her bed and laid upon the comforter. She looked up at the ceiling, thinking that the townhouse looked much different than the duke’s grand estate.

The walls were painted white, reflecting the bits of sunlight coming

through the clouds. As she laid there, she heard the sound of thunder before the heavens opened and rain started to pelt the windowpanes. Felicia listened to the rain, thinking the storm outside was just as terrible as she felt inside.

“What am I going to do now?” Felicia whispered to the ceiling. Miss Mathews had left her, she had been encouraged to return straight away to her parents by the duke and duchess, and she had no idea what had come of Ernest. She had been trying her very best to forget that the man even existed. She needed to move on but didn’t know how to.

She thought about what her parents had whispered to one another, that they would marry her off to the highest bidder. Tears came to her eyes at such a thought. She knew that no acceptable gentleman would marry her, now that she was no longer an innocent. And the most undesirable gentleman would only consider her now. Her future seemed to be in tatters, and she had no idea what to do about all of it.

“Why did you leave?” Felicia whispered as she rolled onto her side and looked at the wall. She pulled a pillow to her chest and another underneath her head. She yearned for some sort of comfort and felt she would never feel the same way for anyone else the way she had felt with Ernest. She had been so sure of his feelings for her that she never thought that after they had been together, they would ever be apart.

The exhaustion from the last few days of travelling finally caught up to Felicia. She didn’t fight it as it overcame her. She listened to the sound of the rain, wondering if it would last a few days and give her a good excuse to stay in her bedchamber. Eventually, exhaustion consumed her and allowed her to sleep peacefully without any nightmares.

## Chapter 18

Ernest wiped the sweat from his brow as he looked around the empty store space. He breathed heavily as he knelt on the hardwood floors. He rolled back his shoulders, trying to ease the discomfort he felt in his muscles from scrubbing the floors all day. It wasn't the best shop space in Town, but it would have to do till he could gain some popularity and get plenty of business.

Since arriving in Town, Ernest had been working hard. He searched every popular shopping street in Town, trying to find an empty space to host his gallery. When he finally found a building with a small living space upstairs, he had paid the first two months' rent upfront since he was so excited to find an empty space not far from some of the major shopping streets. The only downside was that it had been quite dirty.

It had been three days of cleaning from the moment the sun came up till late in the night with the aid of lanterns to finally get all the wood finishing cleaned and polished. There was plenty of wall space for him to hang his paintings, a small back room with a window that he could use as his space for painting, and a long counter towards the front where he could talk with customers. In the morning, he would hang the few paintings he had brought with him and finally make an open sign for the front door.

In the papers, he had posted an ad for his gallery shop to soon be opening. Under the name Mr Edward Simmons, he would introduce himself to society and break his ties with his past family name. As long as he didn't run into anyone from the duke's household, he was sure to eventually succeed.

What gave him the motivation to keep pushing forward was the

thought of Felicia. His mind was constantly thinking of her, reminding him to keep pushing forward with all of his hard work. He had no time to waste and needed to make a good name for himself so that when he proposed to Felicia's father, he would have a decent enough reputation that the earl might consider him.

Even at the lowest levels of society, he had heard the rumours circulating about Lady Felicia. A few articles had been posted in the scandal sheets of the newspaper. And he'd heard similar talk on the streets. Before finding a place to live, he'd been staying at a local tavern with his things. There had been a conversation about the earl's daughter who had slept with a gardener. It hurt Ernest to hear such things, but at least he hadn't heard his name being spoken or referencing the fact that he was a painter.

Ernest pushed himself onto his feet and tossed his scrub brush into the pail of water. He wiped his sweating face on the back of his sleeve as he listened to the sound of raining falling outside. He sighed, thinking he wouldn't get to washing his laundry today if he could not dry it outside in the small courtyard behind his shop. He felt good to know that he had a place to sell his paintings and could commission more work from hopefully wealthy people. He had so many hopes and dreams that he knew he couldn't give up now.

With the floors dry, he took to the stairs to the small living space above the shop. It was only two rooms upstairs, a kitchen and dining table, and the other was his bedroom. His paintings lay on the dining table. He went over to the large landscapes, framed in mahogany wood, and took them downstairs one at a time to start putting them up on the walls where he'd pounded nails into the wood to hang his frames.

By the end of the day, Ernest was able to finish up all the cleaning and get his paintings hung on the wall. In the shop's backroom, he laid out his painting supplies so he could start working on other paintings. He had a few sheets of canvas left and would need to start drawing out

other ideas for future large paintings.

His paints and brushes he set on the room's wooden shelves, while on the oak table, he laid out the canvas and his graphite pencils. When all was said and done, he looked around the room and knew he should be proud of everything he'd accomplished.

However, he couldn't help feeling a sense of sadness in his heart as he stood alone in the room. He missed Felicia terribly, wondered constantly how she was faring, and often thought about writing her under his new name. He'd kept her letter in his pocket at all times, a reminder of her love for him and what all his hard work was going towards. He would succeed because he needed to. The success of his gallery shop was much more than just becoming a renowned painter. It was now finding a way to properly marry Felicia now that they had been intimate together.

Ernest settled down at the oak table and found a scrap of wood from the shop's previous owner. He cleaned it well with a damp rag, then he took out his paints and started to create a sign he could hang over the door of his shop.

Tonight, he would be able to hang it so that in the morning when he opened his door, he would be ready for new customers, and those travelling along the road not too far from the main shopping streets would hopefully be able to see his little shop. With the ad he'd posted in the paper, he was quite hopeful that tomorrow would be a success.

While he painted, he imagined what it would be like to see Felicia again. He would see the happiness in her face as their eyes aligned once more. They would be reunited, and their love for one another would blossom once more. He would get to tell her all about the challenges he had to face to open up his shop.

Most of the money he'd saved from his earnings from Daniel had gone into renting the building from the owner and then cleaning the rafters to the floorboards. It had been a lot of hard work, and now he was ready to reap the bounty of that hard work.

He pictured Felicia in his mind, her golden hair and bright blue eyes. He thought of her in the garden, amongst the rose bushes and the sunlight on her face. Ernest could easily remember her beauty and couldn't help using the colours of gold and blue in his sign, hoping it would catch any passers' attention.

More than anything, Ernest wanted to be with Felicia again. He imagined one day owning an even bigger shop in the most popular shopping street in London. It would be large enough for both him and Felicia to work side by side, painting and creating wonderful pieces. Perhaps one day, their paintings would even hang in the Royal Gallery for all of the elite families to see.

No matter what, Ernest was going to keep dreaming big. He was going to put all his hard work into his dreams and one day find a way to marry Felicia. His fame would help him, and tomorrow was going to be the first day of the rest of his life as a painter. Ernest Reed no longer existed. Now he was Edward Simmons, a talented painter who was going to make a big impression on the Ton.

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"Hurry, Felicia. I wish to be one of the first patrons of this gallery I have read about in the papers. When I attended tea with Lady Nickels yesterday, all the women were talking about it," Lady Casey said as she waited for her daughter to finish pulling on her gloves and hat.

Felicia sighed, thinking a gallery was the last place she wanted to go. She hadn't sketched since returning to Town, let alone paint. It reminded her too much of Ernest, and anything that reminded her of him only made her hurt worse. Now, there was much talk about a new gallery in Town, and it was the last place Felicia wanted to be. However, her mother had insisted that the two of them be seen in society often to help build their reputation once more.

Once ready, Felicia followed her mother out of the house and towards the waiting carriage. She kept her face hidden by the brim of her hat and her chin tilted down. Her eyes followed the stepping stones towards the cobblestone street, where the four horses and carriage waited to take the countess and her daughter to the new gallery shop. Since returning to Town, Felicia had succumbed to her mother's wishes concerning improving her reputation. As far as her mother was concerned, Felicia had been chorused and was innocent in the entire action. Felicia hated living the lie but knew it was the only choice she had at the moment.

Once tucked away in the carriage, the drapes drawn to oppose any peeking eyes as they travelled through Town, Lady Casey turned her attention on her daughter.

"This afternoon, I have arranged for us to have tea with Lady Diggins. It is nice of the woman to accept us into her own to have tea with her associates," her mother said, folding her hands in her lap. Felicia looked up at her but said nothing. Her eyes on her mother were the only acknowledgement she was willing to give. Arguing would prove pointless.

Eventually, Felicia's eyes moved to the drapes of the small carriage windows. She listened to the sound of the carriage rolling against the cobblestone road, the chatter from the pedestrians on the sidewalk, and the call of the horses to one another as they continued to pass

other carriages and riders. She tried hard not to wallow in self-pity but wondered if going to stay with Sierra and Daniel had been the wrong choice for her now that her heart hurt so much.

When the carriage came to a stop, the footman hopped down from the driver's bench and pulled open the door for them. He helped her mother down before Felicia helped herself down to the sidewalk, ignoring the footman altogether. She looked up and down the street, realizing they were around the corner from one of the main shopping streets in Town.

There wasn't much foot traffic on the street, making Felicia think that at least she wouldn't run into anyone who might try to talk to her about her scandalous ways. Some women would turn their noses up at Felicia, while other unmarried young ladies wanted to know all the details as though she was some rebellious hero.

A small bell rang overhead as she and her mother went inside the shop. A gentleman at the counter greeted her mother while Felicia slipped from behind her and went to the walls to view the paintings. She kept her hat over her face, a small shield from the rest of the world. Instead, she became lost in the paintings and slowly began to remember the pleasure she had from creating her own.

For the first time since leaving the countryside, Felicia felt herself relax. She walked slowly around the square room, seeing that the only decorations were the paintings themselves. She thought that was clever, that any other decorations would pull customers away from the main purpose of the store.

The walls and floors were all hardwood, but they had been recently polished so they reflected the lantern light that hung overhead. Two windows in the back let in natural sunlight that showed on a few paintings that hung on the divider wall between the counter and the



shop's back.

Behind that wall was where Felicia stood, examining the landscape paintings and becoming lost in each painting's details. She could hear her mother chatting with the shopkeeper, the owner and painter no doubt excited to speak with such a fine woman whose wealth was clearly displayed in her silk gown and the string of pearls she wore around her neck. Felicia, on the other hand, wasn't interested in speaking to the painter. She hardly had an interest in speaking to any man. Therefore, when she heard her mother's voice calling her name, Felicia sighed and mustered up her resolve not to be rude to the man for her mother's sake.

"Yes, Mother?" Felicia asked, coming around the back wall and approaching the counter. She looked at her mother's smiling face, then at the man behind the counter. When her eyes fell on the man, she felt a sharp pain enter her heart. How could this be?

"Felicia, I'd like to introduce you to Mr Simmons, owner of this shop and the painter himself. He's just come back from his travels abroad to Italy and Spain. Now he's brought all his paintings back to London," Lady Casey explained.

Felicia stared at the man, noticing his tanned skin, how his hair was now cut much shorter underneath his bowler hat. But the shape of his face was still recognizable, the depths of his blue eyes. She felt foolish for not realizing the paintings she'd been observing were his.

"He's offering commissioned work. Wouldn't it be nice to have your portrait painted?" her mother asked. "I think it would be nice to have a portrait of myself in the drawing room."

“Whatever you think is best,” Felicia said, tearing her eyes from Ernest and looking at her mother. She dearly wanted to run, to escape the shop. She had so many questions for him, but more than anything she felt his betrayal.

“I’ll talk to your father about it this evening over dinner. I think some new paintings to fill the hallways would liven up the townhouse. With the holiday season approaching, we’ll be spending much more time inside, and it would be nice to have paintings to look at when the weather outside is so cold,” Lady Felicia continued to talk. Felicia looked down at her gloved hands and prayed that the ground would open up and swallow her whole. She didn’t want to be there anymore, to know that Ernest was the very one everyone was talking about.

“You have my card, Lady Casey. Feel free to write to me with any requests, and I’ll write back with my timeline for delivery. It’s been quite busy already this morning, and I will give you a realistic expectation of any paintings you’d like to be commissioned,” Ernest explained.

“Thank you, Mr Simmons,” Lady Casey replied with a chuckle. Felicia felt sick to her stomach to realize that her mother was flirting with the handsome man. To think that Ernest would become another one of her lovers made Felicia want to vomit. She dearly hoped that coming to this shop wasn’t her mother’s motive to seduce the painter.

As her mother made her leave of the shop, Felicia couldn’t help pausing at the open door and looking over her shoulder at Ernest. He was staring, a look of concern on his face. His fingers were balled into fists on the counter. His lips moved as he mouthed words she wasn’t ready to realize. She shook her head, turned towards the carriage, and hurried after her mother. Felicia felt angry then, thinking Ernest was just trying to trick her. There was no way this man truly loved her.

“My word wasn’t that exciting,” Lady Casey enthused once the carriage door was closed.

“Mother, there are many painters for hire in Town. Why does this new one interest you? His shop isn’t even in a good district,” Felicia reasoned.

“Could you not see his expertise in the paintings on the wall?” Lady Casey scoffed. “You have always been captivated by art. I thought you’d be more interested or intrigued.”

“Art is not a suitable hobby for a young lady, as you have told me many times since my youth. I have stopped the hobby altogether,” Felicia said, turning her face away from her mother.

“With your father’s permission, I’d like to commission Mr Simmons to paint our likeness. I think it would be nice,” Lady Casey said despite Felicia’s disinterest.

The idea of Ernest coming to her home made her stiffen with concern. She didn’t want to see the man, let alone be around him. The thought of having to sit still for him to paint her made her very uneasy. The pain of her heartbreak was felt all over again as she pictured Ernest as she had just seen him in her mind. He’d left her and hadn’t tried to send her a letter ever since they parted a few weeks ago.

The carriage took them straight to Lady Diggins’ townhouse a few streets over from Town’s main shopping street. Felicia did her best to compose herself as she followed her mother inside the house. She didn’t want to appear as disturbed as she felt on the inside as her emotions continued to rage. She knew the secret Ernest was keeping from society and wasn’t sure how she felt about that. Nor did she

believe the words he'd mouthed to her when she had looked back at him.

"Ah, Lady Casey, Lady Felicia, so good to see you both," Lady Diggins greeted as they were ushered into the drawing room. Felicia looked around the room to see a small group of women gathered around a circular wooden table. The tabletop was mahogany, while the legs had been painted white. It was a contrast to the pink carpets and furniture. The room was decorated in clashing colours that Felicia thought were as unsettling as her thoughts.

"Ladies, it is good to see you again," Lady Casey said in greeting as they sat down at the table and turned their attention to the other women. "I have just come from the new gallery shop in Town. The one posted in the papers. I have to say that it was a very nice shop."

"You've been quite busy already this morning," Lady Diggins said with a chuckle as the women were all served tea and small plates of cake from the maids.

"I just had to see it for myself," Lady Casey said with a bright smile. "The owner and artist, Mr Edward Simmons, is very talented. I wish to commission him to paint a portrait of my family."

"You've never spoken of doing such a thing before," Lady Canton said as she picked up her teacup. "What makes this painter any different?"

"Besides his charm and handsome looks, his gallery is proof of his skill. As soon as you see for yourself the realism of his paintings, you'll want to commission him as well," Lady Casey explained.

“Lady Felicia, what do you think?” Lady Diggins asked. Felicia was more concerned with her cake and her racing thoughts and had almost not heard the countess address her.

“The shop was lovely. I agree with my mother,” Felicia said, looking up at the other woman. A few of them narrowed their eyes at her, but she expected that. With her tarnished reputation, she was not as easily accepted by high society as in the past. Therefore, Felicia did her best to keep quiet and out of the conversation most of the time. She’d never been tempted to be a socialite like her mother and therefore remained quiet as much as she could.

“There is going to be a public dance in a fortnight. Do you think any of you will be attending?” Lady Canton asked, turning the conversation. For this, Felicia was grateful.

“I surely will not be there,” Lady Casey was quick to say after taking a sip of her tea. “Any lower class member of good standing would be permitted to attend. I don’t think it is good for the classes to mingle.”

“It may be the only chance for Lady Felicia to marry,” Lady Diggins pointed out. “Being married to a wealthy merchant would give her an easy life, I’m sure.”

Felicia was stunned to hear this. She looked towards her mother and watched as the woman slowly set her teacup down and folded her hands in her lap. Felicia knew what her mother was doing, and that was collecting her thoughts and choosing her words carefully to reply to the woman’s accusation.

“Lord Casey and I have full hopes for Lady Felicia yet. She is a woman

of elite status and will no doubt marry a reputable gentleman one day,” Lady Casey said slowly. “No need to attend such a function for her sake.”

“After what she did, why would you still have hope for a good match?” Lady Diggins pressed on.

“She was tricked,” Lady Casey bit back. “No reason to fault the girl for being misled. Nor do I think reiterating it over tea is going to do her any good.”

Felicia shivered, listening to the conversation with her eyes lowered as she sipped tea. It was as though she wasn’t there, and her mother was having a leisurely conversation with her friends. It was a sickening feeling, and Felicia was sure she would retire to her bed the moment they returned to the house.

“Fear not, Lady Felicia. We do support you still,” Lady Diggins said, forcing Felicia to look up.

“Thank you, My Lady,” Felicia replied. She felt wrong for saying such things or allowing her mother to speak for her. She had been in love with Ernest, had willingly given her body over to him. Now, she had to pretend there were no feelings involved and that Ernest was the villain in her story.

Felicia only felt relief once the tea party came to an end. She drank two cups of tea and ate a slice of cake, which she felt was suitable for the event. She was polite, saying her goodbyes to each lady in attendance and thanking Lady Diggins for having them. The moment she was back in the carriage with her mother, the door shut and secured, her mother shook her head as she pulled off her gloves in

frustration.

“Lady Diggins was sure full of herself today. Questioning my motives and your actions,” her mother said, wringing her gloves together. “And to think they would suggest we attend a public dance. That is so beneath us.”

“Do you believe that is my only option, though?” Felicia dared asked. “That I should try to marry a man beneath our station. Perhaps a baron or a successful merchant?”

“Even though I know that your dowry would ensure that you’re comfortable the rest of your life, that doesn’t mean your husband wouldn’t spend it all if he were a merchant or a lower-ranking noble. You need a husband that is similar to your wealth, someone who will take care of you as well.”

“I fear that Lady Diggins might be right, that I should set my sights lower,” Felicia said.

“Nonsense. I won’t allow my daughter to marry below her station,” Lady Casey said, her voice indicating that their conversation had come to an end. Felicia averted her eyes once more, wondering why her heart was hoping again. Now that she knew what Ernest had been up to, her curiosity had grown.

When they returned to their townhouse once more, her mother made haste through the house to locate her father to no doubt talk about the painter she wanted to commission. Feeling agitated, Felicia made her way through the house to the backdoor so she could step out onto the veranda and down the steps to the garden. She hadn’t taken a stroll around the garden since returning to Town. She’d mostly stayed in her

bedchamber. Yet, needing some exercise, she started to walk through the gardens as she tried to clear her mind with a bit of vigorous walking.

Tears kept welling up in Felicia's eyes as she walked. She eventually slowed her pace, needing to dry her eyes before she lost sight of where she was going and had an accident. She was in the back portion of the gardens, far from the house, and didn't want to risk getting hurt away from where she could safely call for help.

"This is absolutely ridiculous," she said to herself as she pulled her handkerchief from her pocket and dried her eyes. She hated that she was still upset with Ernest, that he still affected her so. She felt her heart break all over again, thinking of seeing him just mere hours ago and that her mother wanted to invite the man to their home to commission some paintings. It was all too much for her to bear.

As she came to the pond Ernest had helped her paint, she couldn't help staring at the water and thinking about all the lovely times she'd spent with the painter. She had loved him, had felt for him more than any other person before. She was ready to run away from her family and be with him. Yet, in the end, after giving herself to him, he had fled without another word to her. And for that reason, she was determined to dislike Ernest for the rest of her life.



## Chapter 19

Ernest could hardly believe his luck. The first day of his shop being open had been a complete success. All sorts of people from the common man to the wealthiest had come to his shop to observe his paintings and enquire about commissioning him for other landscape paintings and portraits.

He'd given his calling card to many men and women and felt deep in his heart that his shop would be a success. Even more so, if things turned out the way he was hoping, he would need to hire one or two apprentices.

Out of all the people he had talked to that day, there was one young lady that stuck out in his mind. He hadn't hoped to see her so soon, let alone have talked in great length with her mother about commissioned art. The idea of coming to her home and painting her likeness thrilled him more than all the enquires he'd received that day. He wanted to be with Felicia again, to be by her side.

The only discouraging thing was the way she had looked at him when her mother had called her to the counter. When their eyes had met, she appeared to have seen a ghost. She didn't talk to him, but instead to her mother and eventually refused to look at him once more. It was only when they were leaving that she looked over her shoulder at him. That was when he'd taken the chance to mouth that he loved her. But her reaction had been discouraging. She had looked sorrowful as she had left his shop, leaving him wondering if her feelings for him had changed.

The rest of the day, Ernest had been forced to focus only on his many customers. He had sold a few paintings already, and in a few days, he expected to receive many letters from those that wanted to

commission work from him. Ernest knew that during the afternoon and evening hours he would be painting to replace those pieces he'd already sold. He knew he had plenty to be grateful for, to be excited about his quick success. But all he could think about that evening was Felicia and her reaction to coming into his shop.

He wondered if he should write to her, explain his plan, and that he was still interested in marrying her. All that he was doing was so he could be worthy of marrying her, that her father might agree to the match. He wanted to write her a long letter explaining his actions and why he hadn't contacted her quite yet. He wanted to be sure of his success as a painter and shop owner, hoping to inspire Felicia to keep waiting on him. But now, after seeing her today, he wasn't sure what the best course of action was going to be.

When the following day came, Ernest was ready to interact with customers and make notes of any upcoming commissions. There seemed to be the same swell of people the second day, encouraging Ernest's hopes of being a success.

He sold a few more paintings, and he felt confident that he had recouped much of the money he had spent to get the shop looking decent, as well as the paintings he had worked so hard to create. In a few days, he would have at least one painting to replace the ones he'd sold, and it made him wonder if he should place an ad for an assistant. Only the end of the week would tell.

"Your paintings are quite beautiful," came a female voice as someone approached the counter. He'd just made a new acquaintance from a man who wanted to commission Ernest and was feeling very good about his shop when he faced the woman. His stomach tightened as he looked at the woman and saw a familiar face.

"Thank you," Ernest replied, praying the woman wouldn't recognize

him. He'd cut his hair short and had started to wear a hat to disguise himself so no one would recognize him. He'd worn a fine shirt and vest, a cravat high on his neck to cover his tanned skin. The last thing he wanted was to be recognized by anyone but Felicia.

"I once knew a fine painter, but the man betrayed my feelings in the end," Miss Mathews said, pushing back a strand of her brown hair.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Ernest said, lowering his head so she wouldn't see his face.

"How much is this painting?" called a gentleman.

Ernest was grateful for the distraction, stepping out from behind the counter to approach the man. He conversed with the gentleman on the price and ended up selling the painting to him. When he took a quick look around the shop to spot Miss Mathews again, he was happy to see that she was gone. She had looked quite ghostly, wearing a very simple gown and a brown bonnet tied around her head. He dearly hoped he wouldn't be seeing her again or that she didn't recognize him. She seemed to be quite upset about what had happened back at the duke's home.

Towards the afternoon, when the flow of traffic began to slow down, he took a look at the post that had come for him that morning. He was interested to see who was writing him already and started to flip through the letters till he found a familiar name. He smiled as he opened Lady Casey's letter, hoping for good news.

*Dear Mr Simmons,*

*Lord Casey and I would like to invite you to our home tomorrow afternoon to paint the likeness of our daughter, first before commissioning two more paintings for the earl and me. Please reply with your agreement and price,*

*Lady Casey, Countess of Bellingham*

Ernest was filled with excitement as he reread the letter half a dozen times before he reached below the counter and withdrew a sheet of writing paper. With a sharp quill and fresh inkpot, he wrote Lady Casey a reply and tried his best to write as eloquently as possible. Though he might be a good painter, his calligraphy could still use some practice.

As soon as the letter dried, he folded it and applied hot wax to the back before pressing his seal into the back. The moment it was ready, he took a coin from his till and walked outside. He waved down an errand boy and pressed the letter and coin into his hand.

“Deliver this quickly, will you?” Ernest asked.

“Yes sir,” the boy exclaimed as he looked down at the halfpence in his hand. He pocketed both inside his vest and took off down the road. Ernest was confident that his letter would be delivered promptly.

Once back inside his shop, he went through the rest of his letters. He had a notebook that he used to keep a log of all the correspondence he had received, those who wanted to commission him, and which ones he would be sending reply letters to. As he looked at his notebook after just one day of receiving post, he could see that the rest of his month would be booked commissioning paintings. He felt so happy to already becoming quite successful just by hanging up his own

paintings to display. But he would ensure that Lady Casey was the first client he took on.

The last letter he had opened was one that didn't have any writing at all. He was curious to know who had addressed him and how the post boy knew to bring it to him. He opened the letter, a plain paper that was quite common, and a wax seal that had no family crest pressed into it. His curiosity grew more as he opened the letter and laid it flat on the counter. There was only one sentence written in the letter that made his blood run cold.

*I know who you really are, Ernest Reed.*

Ernest had no idea who had written him and what the point of the letter would be. Was it meant to scare him? Was someone trying to threaten him? He knew for sure if society came to hear that he wasn't really Mr Simmons, but instead Mr Ernest Reed, then it wouldn't be hard to put two and two together. He would be scorned for laying with a lady of society, and no doubt would need to leave London right away.

Ernest didn't want to start over with his life for a second time. He wanted to make his mark on society and become a renowned painter. He had big goals to one day have one of his paintings hanging in the Royal Gallery and to spend the rest of his life painting wonderful pieces of other families to enjoy in their homes. But more than anything, he wanted to marry Felicia and share his dreams and goals with her as well.

If someone were threatening what he'd worked so hard to accomplish, then he would need to find out who had sent him this letter and what they wanted from him. Ernest certainly wouldn't go down without a fight, and no matter what, he would keep fighting for his chance to be with Felicia forever.

## Chapter 20

Felicia paced back and forth in the drawing room, wringing her hands together. She was so dreadfully nervous as she waited for the butler to show Ernest into the room. Her mother had confirmed with her the day before that the painter would be coming to their house, and she could tell all her friends she had acquired the painter's services before anyone else.

Felicia knew that Ernest was a great painter, but now that the word had got out that the handsome traveller recently returned to England was now commissioning his work, it seemed every married woman wanted their portrait painted by him. The gentlemen who wanted to spruce up their houses bought his completed paintings. In just a few short weeks, Mr Edward Simmons had become the talk of the town. However, it was Felicia who knew the truth about him.

Now she was faced with the task of sitting still while he drew and painted her portrait. It would be an all-day affair that might last for days, depending on how large the portrait would be. But with only a maid or footman in the room, Felicia would be left alone with the man and all her racing thoughts. She would have to allow him to look at her and vice-verse as she sat still and let him draw her.

The sound of voices in the hallway tore Felicia's attention from her frantic pacing. She forced herself to sit down near the window, the place her mother had decided would be perfect for the portrait. It would include a part of their home, as well as the view out of the window to the gardens. Her mother certainly had the whole event planned out, and she could hear her mother's voice in the hallway.

"Thank you so much for coming at such short notice. With all your recent fame, I can only imagine how busy you must be these next few

weeks,” Lady Casey said.

“It is my honour to paint the portraits of the Casey family,” Ernest replied.

“You must stay for dinner and tell us more about your travels. You sound quite fascinating,” Lady Casey purred. Felicia rolled her eyes, knowing that she was trying to seduce the handsome young man.

“I would love to stay for dinner. Thank you,” Ernest said as they entered the drawing room together.

Felicia saw that Ernest was carrying a roll of canvas in his hands while two footman came behind him, carrying his supplies and easel. She moved her attention to her mother as she directed Ernest where to put all his things.

“This round table should be big enough for your needs today,” Lady Casey said, gesturing towards the round table near the window, not far from where Felicia stood.

“Yes, it will be adequate for today’s session,” Ernest said, glancing towards Felicia. But she didn’t dare look at him. Instead, she kept focusing on her mother as he began to get everything set up.

“Lady Felicia has always been so interested in art. I am sure she is as thrilled as I am that you are here today,” her mother said, gesturing towards her.

“Of course,” was all Felicia said, not wanting to encourage Ernest that she was at all interested in seeing him.

Though her heart thumped in her chest at the thought of him near her or the thoughts of their lovemaking that slipped into her mind, she focused only on the fact that he had left her just the morning after they’d been together.

“I’ll have the maid bring in a tea tray,” Lady Casey said before she wandered off.

The two footmen were left in the room, Felicia saw. She looked out the window as she listened to Ernest set up his things. A part of her was curious to see what he was doing since she’d only seen him finish paintings he’d already started. Their time together had been more focused on her creating her paintings than the other way around.

“Lady Felicia, if you’ll position yourself for the portrait, I will begin,” came Ernest’s voice.

She sighed as she finally looked at him. Her eyes locked with his blue ones, the icy depths that she could easily fall into. His bowler hat was pulled low on his head, revealing just his eyes and lower part of his face. As she studied him, she saw how different he looked and could easily convince anyone who didn’t know him. After all, he had certainly convinced her he was someone that he wasn’t.

“Do you care to smile?” Ernest asked with a smirk.



Felicia didn't say a word as she looked at him. He held his graphite pencil in his hand, preparing to begin sketching. But instead, he just stared at her. She wanted to ask and say so many things, but with the servants nearby, she didn't dare speak. Instead, she just continued to stare forward as she sat in a comfortable position.

With the sound of footsteps in the hallway, Ernest sighed and turned his eyes to his canvas. He began to sketch her likeness while Felicia just looked forward. Her mother returned to the room then, a maid behind her carrying a silver tea tray that was sat on the table next to his paint supplies.

"Please let me know if there is anything else that I can supply you," Lady Casey said as she stood next to Ernest. Felicia couldn't see them together, the large canvas and easel covering their view. She blushed as she listened to their conversation.

"Thank you, My Lady," Ernest replied.

"I've been looking forward to you coming to my home ... to paint," her mother said slowly and seductively.

"It's my honour," Ernest replied, the sound of his pencil moving across the canvas coming to Felicia's ears. He began looking around the canvas at Felicia before he would dart back behind it to continue working on his sketch.

"Well, I will leave you to it, Mr Simmons. Please let one of the footmen know if you need anything at all from me," Lady Casey said, her voice a purr.

Felicia did her best to keep her expressions neutral as she watched her mother leave the room. She didn't like to see or hear her mother try so hard to seduce Ernest. It was one thing to know that her mother liked to bed younger men. It was another to witness it herself and realize what her mother was attempting to do.

As silence descended upon the room, Felicia tried to listen to anything else but Ernest working on the canvas. She strained to hear the birds outside in the garden or the grandfather clock ticking in the hallway. But it was the way Ernest moved the graphite pencil across the canvas that really caught her attention no matter how she tried to avoid it.

"Do you need to take a break while the tea is still hot?" Ernest asked, peeking around the canvas at her.

"No. The tea tray is for you," Felicia explained.

"Surely we could share," Ernest suggested.

"It would not be proper for a lady to share a meal with a merchant," she replied.

"It is not as though we are alone," Ernest said with a chuckle, gesturing towards the two footmen who stood at the ready.

"I do not wish to," Felicia deadpanned, hoping to keep him quiet during this ordeal.

For a while, Ernest did not try to speak with her again. She appreciated this from him as she found a spot on the far wall to stare at behind him so she didn't have to look in his eyes each time he looked around the canvas at her. Instead, she stared off in the distance and tried to think of anything else but Ernest and the memories she shared with him.

Once Ernest moved from graphite to his paints, taking a quick break to drink a cup of tea and eat a tartlet, she started to wonder about how the painting was coming along. She hadn't had any sort of interest in painting since leaving the duke's home, nor the urge to do any type of drawing to occupy her time. Instead, she had locked herself away in her room during her free time to read. It was only when her mother demanded her attendance at one social function or another did Felicia leave her room.

"The scenery outside is that of fall. I can paint whatever you'd like outside the window when it comes to the garden," Ernest said, breaking through her thoughts.

"It matters little to me," Felicia replied. "My mother has commissioned this portrait, not I."

"Yet you have still worn your best," Ernest noted.

"Silk gowns are customary for my status," Felicia retorted.

"Regardless of your preference in cotton?" he asked. "It is your portrait after all."

Felicia had the urge to lash out at him, to quiet him for ever speaking as though he knew her. But she knew that would cause suspicion amongst the servants. Therefore, she pressed her lips together and stared ahead, trying to imagine he wasn't there, and she wasn't in that room.

However, after a time, she began to grow weary. She glanced at the tea tray, thinking a cup of tea would be a nice refreshment for the moment. There were delicious tarts on the tray that Ernest hadn't even touched. She would be interested in one or two of them to satisfy the rumbling in her stomach.

"I believe a break is in order," Ernest said, setting down his paintbrush. "I can see the way you are eyeing the tea tray as though you haven't eaten in days."

"It's hard to sit still for so long," Felicia said as she stood and stretched. She didn't make eye contact with Ernest as she went over to the table to pour herself a cup of tea.

"Here, let me," Ernest offered, picking up one of the teacups and pouring the hot tea into the cup for her. He passed her the porcelain cup and saucer, which she accepted without looking up at his face. She said nothing as she sipped the tea. Ernest picked up his paintbrush once more and began working on what Felicia could only guess was the background colours. She was tempted to look but forced herself not to.

"I would love your opinion so far," Ernest spoke up as Felicia picked up a tart and took a bite. She just shook her head as she ate. She was hoping not to encourage him any longer and that he would finish his work and leave her in peace. Instead, he asked, "Why do you shy away from me as though nothing happened." His voice was but a

whisper.

Felicia was forced to look at him then as she furrowed her brows. "You left without saying a word to me as though none of it did matter," she whispered back. She turned from him and walked to the window with her cup of tea, trying to keep her hands from shaking, focusing on the world outside instead of the turmoil she felt on the inside as she sipped her tea.

When Felicia was finished, she set the teacup aside and returned to the chair by the window. She found the spot once more that she focused her gaze on as Ernest continued painting. All the while, Felicia did her best to keep from shedding any tears. It hurt so to think that Ernest could just appear back in her life and not realize the damage he had caused her. She was living a sheltered life, ruled by her mother, and her passion for art had been washed away. She was left instead feeling empty inside where she used to feel love.

The sound of footsteps came from the hallway. Felicia moved her eyes to the open door and saw her mother saunter in moments later. She sighed as she realized her mother had changed into a new day gown and now had curled hair. It made Felicia feel even sicker to her stomach to see the show her mother was putting on for Ernest. She wanted nothing more than to leave the room but knew that would be foolish since Ernest's painting would take much time to complete.

"How are you faring, Mr Simmons?" Lady Casey asked as she came to stand next to him.

"Very well, My Lady," he replied as he dabbed paint onto the canvas.

"My word, you are certainly extraordinary. Just mere hours, and

you've already painted so much," Lady Casey exclaimed, stepping closer to the painting. Felicia saw the way Ernest stepped back to give her plenty of room and maintain a safe distance. She could at least find some sort of confidence in the fact that he wasn't feeding into her mother's seduction.

"I've been painting all my life," Ernest said. "For me, it is like breathing."

"Your talent is quite evident," Lady Casey said, turning to Ernest then. "I have told cook to prepare for an additional guest. I hope you haven't changed your mind about staying for dinner."

"I am honoured," was all Ernest said as he lowered his eyes, showing his respect.

"Pray tell, what does a painter do to relax?" Lady Casey asked, folding her arms.

"There is a public dance that I plan to attend next week," Ernest said, looking towards his canvas. Felicia looked at Lady Casey, curious to know what her mother's response was going to be.

"Ah, so I've heard," her mother replied. "I've been meaning to speak to my husband about attending to show our support to families of all statures."

Felicia was shocked by her words. Was her mother really considering attending a social function so below their status just to seduce a painter? Her mother's actions were far more outlandish than Felicia

had ever considered them to be. What was it about Ernest that affected her mother so? To think of them together only made Felicia rather sick to her stomach. She tried taking deep breaths to settle her nerves.

“You would surely please the masses with your family’s presence at such a function,” Ernest said. Felicia could tell he sounded happy about the news by the joy laced in his words.

“Wouldn’t you agree, Felicia? It would be a nice outing for us all,” Lady Casey said, turning her attention to her daughter then.

“Yes, Mother,” was all Felicia could muster. She didn’t dare disagree with her mother when she wondered if she’d only be able to find a suitable match if she lowered her standards. Plus, she would then be able to speak to Ernest in a more relaxed setting. It would be easier to disappear from sight with him then instead of right there in the drawing room.

“Then I will say it is settled then,” Lady Casey said happily. “We shall attend the public dance.”

After a bit more conversation, her mother left the room once more to let Lord Casey know of her decision. Ernest was then able to continue working on his painting while Felicia relaxed once more. The butler came through the room at one point and called the footman away to attend to other business matters. Felicia was surprised to realize that Ernest had been left alone with her. She could only reason that the moment alone with the painter would be short-lived.

“I never intended to hurt you,” Ernest said, sidestepping the canvas and speaking directly to her. He held the paintbrush in his hand and

posed himself as though he was observing her likeness to continue painting. But his words had Felicia focusing on his blue eyes intensely.

“Then what was your intention?” Felicia asked, bitterness on her tongue as she spoke.

“I knew that our love had been discovered. I knew that your father would not accept my offer. So I came to Town and reimagined myself. I will become a successful painter and win your father’s acceptance so we can be together,” Ernest quickly whispered.

“Did you not read my letter that I was ready to run away with you?” Felicia replied softly. “But then you just left, and I haven’t heard from you since.”

“Is it not best that I meet you like this, as though we are strangers? Then your parents can see us come together. Surely, with your tarnished reputation, this scandal that you wanted, we can more easily be together,” Ernest suggested.

“If my mother has her way, the only person you’re going to be with is her,” Felicia said darkly. Ernest narrowed his eyes at her, seeming to be completely put off by her words. He shook his head as he focused on his painting once more. Felicia tried to relax as her lady’s maid came into the room and took up a position close by. To the maid, Ernest and Felicia had been as they had all day.

Eventually, Felicia noticed the passing of time. The sun began to move towards the horizon, the light in the room shifting. Ernest hadn’t tried to speak to her again, and Felicia had done her best to sit comfortably. The idea that she would also need to dine with Ernest didn’t sit well with her. Nothing he had said had sat well with her. She didn’t see



Ernest's actions the same way he did. All she felt was the bitterness in her heart where the love she had once held for Ernest had existed.

"My Lady, I can escort you to your bedchamber to prepare for dinner," Felicia's lady's maid said when the footmen came into the room to light the candles on the wall scones to increase the light in the room.

"Yes, thank you," Felicia said as she rose slowly. She'd become stiff from sitting for so long. "Have a hot bath prepared for me."

"Yes, My Lady," her lady's maid replied as she offered Felicia her arm. She accepted it, finding the extra support welcome.

"I look forward to dining with your family this evening," Ernest said as she passed. Felicia paused to look at him, to simply nod. But then, she caught sight of the painting. Her lips parted as she looked at it, as though she was looking in the reflection of a mirror. Already he'd been able to capture her likeness so well that she was captivated by the sight of it.

"Does the painting agree with you, My Lady?" Ernest asked, a smirk on his lips.

"Yes," was all Felicia said as she looked at him. She saw him smiling and remembered all the other times he'd looked at her like that. She pulled her eyes away from him and walked with her lady's maid from the room, feeling a deep blush coming to her cheeks.

"The painting seems very nice," her lady's maid spoke as they walked to the stairs and up towards the second floor.

“Yes, it appears that Mr Simmons is a good painter. He will no doubt create a fast reputation for himself,” Felicia replied.

Her lady’s maid didn’t reply then as they made it to her bedchamber. There, Felicia decided on what she was going to wear that evening while her lady’s maid prepared her a hot bath. Though Felicia didn’t often wear most of her finer gowns, she decided on a burgundy gown of silk and lace that evening.

It had a low bodice that she knew would display her best features. She wondered what it would be like to tease Ernest like she used to. Would he be able to handle the pressure while dining with her and her parents? Thinking that Ernest deserved to be teased after all the pain he’d put her through, Felicia decided to wear one of her best gowns.

“My Lady, your bath is ready,” her lady’s maid announced. She helped Felicia undress, and as Felicia dipped below the water’s surface in the wooden tub, she felt herself relax. The hot water helped to soothe her aching muscles from sitting so still for so long.

“Is the burgundy gown your choice for this evening?” her lady’s maid asked as she laid it upon her bed.

“Yes,” Felicia declared. “After the bath, I’ll want my hair brushed long.”

“Do you wish it to be curled and pinned?” she was then asked.

“No. Just brushed,” Felicia decided, knowing how Ernest liked her hair. She smirked, thinking it was time for her to show Ernest all that he’d lost.

## Chapter 21

Ernest was nervous as he cleaned up his paints and prepared for dinner. There had been much he hadn't expected when he arrived at the Caseys' townhouse. First, he didn't have any way to prepare for the words of seduction he would receive from Lady Casey. It helped him understand more Felicia's perspective on marriage and why she was only willing to marry for love and felt as though her parents were a burden to her. But why Lady Casey was so obvious about her seduction in front of her daughter made him very suspicious and nervous.

Second, he hadn't thought in a million years that Felicia would have been so cold towards him. He was sure she would be happy to see him, not acting as though his very presence caused her much pain. He'd studied her facial features, the way her eyebrows knitted together as she stared beyond him. He could tell something was bothering her greatly, and having studied her face a hundred times before, he could paint a softer version of her current state.

Furthermore, he hadn't expected to be invited to stay for dinner. To dine with an earl and his family was beyond any of Ernest's expectations at becoming a well-known painter. He wanted to create a small fortune for himself and a good reputation in Town. He didn't expect to socialize with the elite families outside of painting portraits and other commissioned art. Plus, the idea of the Caseys attending a public dance was quite unheard of. He was curious to know if they would actually go through with it.

After Ernest cleaned up his brushes and paints, he stood by the window with his hands clasped behind him. He was in Felicia's home, so close to her. Yet, he felt as though they were miles apart. He had to pretend to be someone he wasn't to gain her parents' attention. He felt as though his plan was coming together nicely, but what would be the point of his efforts if Felicia no longer loved him? Somehow, that

night, he needed confirmation that Felicia still had feelings for him so that he could be reassured in his pursuits for her hand in marriage.

Ernest noticed the shift in shadows in the room as a figure moved down the hallway outside of the drawing room. He turned to greet whoever was coming, and his breath was taken away as Felicia stepped into the room. She wore a stunning burgundy gown, her golden hair flowing down her shoulders. She stopped in the doorway and folded her hands before her, inclining her head towards him. Ernest regained his composure as he bowed to the lady.

“I’m surprised that my parents haven’t been keeping you entertained, Mr Simmons,” Felicia said as she stepped further into the room, glancing at the footmen that stood at the ready.

Ernest smirked as he gestured to the settee. Felicia followed his guidance and sat upon the piece of furniture while he distanced himself from her, taking a wing-backed chair across a small table from her. He figured this would be a suitable distance for the two of them while waiting for her parents to arrive.

“You are gorgeous as ever, Lady Felicia,” Ernest commented in a soft voice. “It suits you.”

“How so?” Felicia asked, tilting up her chin in defiance.

“You have clearly shown you are a lady of high society, but you rebel against such notions by wearing your hair down instead of in the popular styles such as your mother,” Ernest explained. He saw the way she smiled then, feeling some progress had been made between the two of them.

Just then, Lord and Lady Casey entered the room together. Lady Casey was quick to approach Ernest and incline her head towards him before taking a seat next to her daughter on the settee. Ernest stood to his feet and bowed to the lady before turning his attention to Lord Casey. He was a tall man with a round middle. His dark hair was cut short yet combed to one side to hide that he was balding. He had a small smile on his face. Ernest made sure to bow lowly to the man, indicating their positions in society.

“Greetings, My Lord. It is an honour to dine with you and your family this evening,” Ernest said before straightening his posture once more. When the earl gestured for him to sit, Ernest took to his chair once more and removed his bowler hat, resting it on his knee.

“My wife spoke highly of your skills as a painter,” Lord Casey said. “We haven’t had our portraits painted since before Lady Felicia was born. I agree with my wife that it is a good plan to have our portraits painted before your schedule becomes quite booked by the talk of the Town.”

Ernest smiled as he regarded the earl and his pleasant manners, though he was quite underneath him in rank. “Thank you, My Lord. It is true that my schedule has become quite booked for the next few months with commissioned work. I plan to hire an apprentice to keep the shop well stocked with fresh paintings,” Ernest explained.

“Quite a success for someone so recently returned to England,” Lady Casey spoke up.

“It has all been quite a surprise to me,” Ernest admitted. “There are many masters in Town.”

“But none so young as yourself,” Lady Casey reasoned. “I would say the Ton has grown bored with the same old painters. It is good to hear of a new, experienced painter who knows of the world.”

“If your success continues, you’ll no doubt receive an invitation from the Prince Regent,” Lord Casey added. “And to think we were able to snag you first.”

Ernest joined in with the earl’s laughter. He was starting to see now why he’d been invited to stay for dinner. That way, Lord and Lady Casey would have bragging rights with their friends to say they knew Mr Edward Simmons, the talented and handsome painter.

“Tell us about your travels abroad, Mr Simmons,” Lady Casey asked.

Ernest was prepared for such conversations, having planned his disguise perfectly with a back story to go with his new look. He would do anything to separate his past from his future in order to secure Felicia as his wife. With Lord and Lady Casey spreading his story, it would add to his success.

“When my father passed away, I scrounged together what money I had made from my apprenticeship in my youth in Brighton and boarded the first ship heading south. I made my way through the Continent, learning all I could about life and art. I settled in Spain for a short time, learning different painting techniques while also learning the language. Then, I moved further south to Italy to do the same. There are many good painters in Italy where the arts of all kinds are highly explored,” Ernest explained.

Though he'd never travelled out of England before, he knew that Daniel had. Having heard his stories, he used them to fabricate one of his own.

"What brought you back to England?" Lord Casey asked.

"I will not be a young man forever," Ernest said with a smile. "I wish to establish myself in Town and settle down with a wife and children."

"What an honourable intention," Felicia commented.

"Yes, very honourable," Lady Casey was quick to add. Ernest looked towards Felicia for only a moment, his goal to mostly impress her parents for the time being. However, the low cut of her gown revealed much of her bosom and reminded him of their wonderful night together. He had to tear his eyes away from her.

"I plan to attend the public dance next week to socialize more with reputable families in Town," Ernest explained. "Not only to grow my network of associates but possibly be introduced to ladies of eligibility."

"I wish you all the success in the world to meet a woman of good breeding for someone like yourself," Lord Casey said with a nod.

"Thank you, My Lord," Ernest replied, remembering once more the great divide in this position within society.



The conversation turned to upcoming events in Town for the fall season in preparations for the holidays. Ernest listened in, giving small input here and there since he wasn't familiar with Town's normal events. He was trying hard to keep up with the conversation and speak on the topics at hand when he could.

"Mr Simmons, you must be at a loss for what is being discussed," Felicia said at one point. "You've been away from England for so many years that this must all sound foreign to you."

"Oh, forgive me," Lady Casey was quick to say. "I get carried away with the holiday season. So much magic in the air."

"I look forward to capturing the snow when it begins to fall," Ernest said. "So many of my paintings are of the spring and summer, of full blooms and luscious green landscapes. There is a magic to snow and Christmas time that I look forward to painting such landscapes then."

"Surely you'd be interested in painting our gardens when the snow does come," Lord Casey offered. "It would be a beautiful display for your shop."

"Thank you, Lord Casey. I will be sure to enquire of that offer when winter does come," Ernest replied, pleased to be making some headway with Felicia's parents. He also appreciated her subtle input to help steer the conversation in his favour. She might have been angry with him earlier, but she appeared to have softened towards him since.

The butler came into the drawing room then and announced that dinner had been served. Ernest stood to his feet with the earl but waited for the man to offer his arm to his wife. The two of them led

the way to the dining room. Ernest followed Felicia out of the room, making sure to keep his distance. He was a guest in a house he had no business being in. He might be a painter, but he understood that being invited to stay for dinner was more than he could ever dream of when it came to his position in society.

Ernest had eaten many good dishes in his life, but the course served that night seemed fit for a king. Roasted Cornish hen with roasted vegetables, lentil soup, bread with figs and chestnuts, and a chocolate pudding for dessert. All were served with a rich dark red wine that made him feel utterly relaxed and pink in the cheeks.

“Mr Simmons, who are the other families that you will be painting for in the near future?” Lady Casey asked. Ernest considered the woman for a moment, trying to debate if he should really share that sort of information. But he couldn’t think of a reason why he shouldn’t brag a little about the commissioned work he’d already accepted.

“I shall be painting portraits for Lord Miller, the Viscount of Evergreen. Lord Duncan, Marquess of Latten, has asked for a few paintings for his townhouse of country landscapes. And Lady Fitzgerald, the Countess of Walton, has asked me to paint her daughter and future son-in-law at their wedding next spring,” Ernest explained.

“Ah yes, Lady Fitzgerald,” Lady Casey said with a sigh. “Poor woman. Her daughter is marrying a baron. So beneath her.”

“Mother, please. They are in love,” Felicia spoke up.

“Oh, Felicia. You are no better. Letting her heart get swayed by false love,” Lady Casey said, hiccupping as she took another long sip from

her wine.

“Please, my dear. I think you’ve had plenty tonight,” Lord Casey said, gesturing towards the footman. A man came forward and collected the countess’ wine glass, which she seemed irritated by.

“Has Lady Felicia been tricked by false love before?” Ernest asked, wondering what the countess spoke of.

“It’s a terrible story, really,” Lord Casey said with a sigh. “I’m surprised you haven’t heard upon your return to England. My dearest daughter was made to think she was in love with a servant man of all people. He broke her heart and stole her virtue with such false promises.”

Ernest felt his ears burning and his anger starting to rise. He couldn’t believe such a story had been said about him and Felicia. They were in love, had been in love at least at the time of their scandalous act together. But he wouldn’t regret a thing. Had she?

“The man left her the day after, a dog running with his tail between his legs,” Lady Casey spoke up. “Men can be such cowards and liars.”

“That’s enough, Mother. I wish it not to be spoken about any longer,” Felicia said, her eyes on her folded hands in her lap.

“I’m so sorry, my dear,” Lady Casey said, raising her hand sluggishly and patting her daughter on the shoulder. “One day, a reputable man will come and sweep you off your feet. A man fitting for your station in society.”

“It would be best if I took whatever offer of marriage I could receive to avoid becoming a spinster,” Felicia said with a sigh.

“I will not have my daughter marry anyone below her station,” Lord Casey objected. “You must have hope yet, my dear. After all, I believe you’ve done no wrong. Your heart was simply in the wrong place.”

Ernest said nothing as he watched the exchange. His hopes to marry Felicia one day seemed to dwindle. Her father had made it clear that his daughter would marry of good status in society, despite no longer being an innocent. He would need to show Lord Casey that he was a good man, worthy of his daughter, despite his position in society.

When the dinner came to an end, Ernest stood and said his farewells.

“Thank you, Lord and Lady Casey for allowing me to stay for dinner,” he said as he bowed. “You have honoured me immensely with your kindness towards someone of my station.”

“You might not be a nobleman, Mr Simmons, but you are clearly of good breeding. And your talent speaks for itself. I would not be surprised if you received such similar invitations as your fortunes increase,” Lord Casey replied.

“We will see you tomorrow when you come to finish your painting of Felicia,” Lady Casey added.

Their words gave Ernest hope as he righted his posture. He didn't dare speak to Felicia, knowing it would not be needed or expected. Instead, he followed the footman from the room and towards the front of the house. There, he reclaimed his hat that had been left in the drawing room and bid the footman goodnight before stepping outside.

The night's air was refreshing to him as Ernest left the house. He went down the cobblestone road a bit before hailing a petty cab, wanting a quick way home as the chill of the night air set in. That day had been more than he could ever hope for or truly comprehend. He'd been hired by a wealthy family to paint. That was his goal, to make a good fortune from painting as he'd already dreamed.

But he'd learned a lot about the Caseys. He understood now why Felicia hadn't liked being in Town. She appeared to be a completely different person to him while they'd been around one another. More so, he had learned about the feelings she was having towards him since they last parted. And to hear the tale her parents were told. It was as though Felicia had been a victim, and he was the villain. More so, her parents were going to try to match her with a nobleman still.

When Ernest finally made it back to his shop, he paid the petty cab well before unlocking the front door, stepping inside, and then locking the door behind him. He'd eaten so well that he felt like he could go straight to bed and sleep till morning. Instead, he forced himself to go to his studio in the backroom and work on the painting he had sitting on his large table.

With candles lit and the lantern burning overhead, he sat down at his wooden stool and used his spare paintbrushes and paints to continue working on the landscape painting he wanted to display in the shop. He thought about Felicia while he worked, of being able to see her today and be around her. He knew he had a lot to be thankful for and would need to continue pushing forward to one day be with her.

Ernest kept thinking about how he could impress her father. Would it be his reputation with the Ton, or perhaps an immense wealth like his own? He couldn't fathom having as much money as the earl from just painting. He would need to hire many apprentices and perhaps own several galleries in Town before he could consider himself that wealthy. More so, he didn't have that sort of time on his hands. He needed a way to marry Felicia before her parents arranged a marriage for her.

As Ernest painted, he also plotted. He would need to showcase the best of his features and talents to Lord and Lady Casey during the next few days he would be painting portraits for them. Then, at the public ball, he would try to make his intentions known for Felicia as they danced together. Surely, with his rising reputation, he could claim Felicia for his own despite their different status in society.

## Chapter 22

Felicia couldn't help sneaking downstairs when Ernest had come over for the four days in a row to paint a portrait of her mother. Her own portrait hung in the drawing room now, close to the window where she had been sitting. At night, she would look at the painting and think of Ernest, of their time together during the week. She had slowly opened up towards him, even smiling naturally as he finished her painting. During the few moments alone that they got, he would speak openly to her.

"I didn't mean to hurt you so badly, Felicia," he said. "I just wanted to make things right, to become a man your father would feel is worthy of having you as a wife."

"You act as though I care what my parents think," Felicia had replied.

"Don't you want a life of ease, a life with me?" he desperately asked.

"I don't know what I want anymore," Felicia said with a sigh, her smile slipping from her face. "I have not drawn or painted since I returned to Town. All the things I loved, that brought me joy have disappeared."

"But I am here now ... I am working hard to make things."

"You are a different man now, Mr Simmons," she had said coldly. "I must learn who you really are all over again."

Despite her words, he had pressed on, speaking with her when the moment was appropriate. It showed Felicia that he wasn't going to give up on her so easily as she continued to push him away.

"At the ball, I shall look for you," Ernest had said. "Then we may be permitted to dance with one another."

"Are you saying you know how to dance?" Felicia had teased.

"I've been practicing," Ernest reasoned. "So, I should be a suitable dance partner."

"We shall see," was all Felicia replied with.

Now, as Felicia tiptoed down the hallway of her home towards the drawing room, she was curious to know how Ernest's session was going with her mother. She was starting to see how he was striving to regain their previous relationship. But unless he was able to convince her parents that he was suitable enough to marry her, then they probably wouldn't have a fighting chance unless they ran away together.

"Lady Casey, are you needing a break from sitting for so long?" Felicia heard Ernest ask. "You seem to be fidgeting."

"No, I am quite fine," came her mother's voice. "I am just not suited to sitting still while a man observes me so."



“Would you feel better if your husband or daughter joined us for light conversation?” Ernest offered.

“I don’t think that will be necessary,” she said. “Perhaps I could stretch my legs for a moment and see your progress so far?”

“Very well, My Lady,” Ernest said, sounding a bit irritated.

Felicia poked her head around the corner to peek into the drawing room. She watched as her mother walked slowly around the easel the canvas was resting on. Lady Casey was standing rather close to Ernest, forcing him to take a few steps back. He eventually moved over to the table where his paints were and started to mix a few colours on his hand board he carried with his paintbrush.

“Your work is remarkable,” Lady Casey said, looking at her own portrait. “I have told all my friends about you.”

“Thank you, Lady Casey,” Ernest said to be polite.

“I tell them not only how well you can paint, but how handsome you are, and what a delight you are to socialize with,” Lady Casey said in a charming voice as she turned her eyes on Ernest. She walked over to him and placed her hand on his shoulder, causing him to stiffen.

“You know, I have admired you since the first time I laid eyes on you,” she said, her voice a purr. Felicia’s gut clenched as she waited to see what Ernest would do.

“Your remarks are very kind, Lady Casey. But I don’t believe your touch is appropriate,” Ernest said.

“Surely you don’t mind a woman’s affections, Mr Simmons,” Lady Casey said sweetly.

“I wish to keep things professional between us. I have my eyes set on a young lady I wish to marry and wouldn’t want to do anything to jeopardize my chances of winning her parents over,” Ernest explained, stepping around the countess and returning to his painting.

“Who is this young lady you wish to marry?” Lady Casey asked, seeming to be unaffected by his refusal of her.

“Unfortunately, she is a young lady above my station,” Ernest said with a sigh, adding highlights to the painting.

“You have certainly set your sights high,” Lady Casey said with a chuckle, returning to her seated position by the fireplace. “I hope your interaction with high society hasn’t given you any false ideas about classes blending.”

“I am hoping that my fame and fortune might persuade her parents to accept my offer of marriage,” Ernest admitted. Felicia was surprised that he was being so bold. Even more so, she was surprised that her mother was entertaining him after he had denied her affection.

“Maybe if she is the daughter of a baron. But certainly, not the daughter of a viscount, marquess, and certainly not an earl,” Lady Casey reasoned.

“I appreciate your advice, Lady Casey,” Ernest said as he focused on his painting once more.

Felicia was satisfied that Ernest had been able to escape her mother’s clutches of seduction, but it hurt her heart to think that Ernest was trying so hard with her parents but wasn’t able to make any leeway with his desires. More so, she was not convinced that she could give her heart to Ernest once more.

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Of all the dances she had attended, Felicia was most looking forward to the public dance. It wouldn’t be a fancy affair where all the Ton was present to show off to one another. The only purpose of the dance was to have fun and socialize with people of lower status. Since it was a public dance, families that were not of nobility would be in attendance as well. However, a certain type of reputation and wealth was expected.

“My dear, are you certain you want to attend such a function?” Lord Casey asked as Felicia came down the stairs in one of her more similar silk gowns. “It is so far below us.”

“I think it will make for an interesting night,” Lady Casey replied.

“Perhaps I will meet someone more suitable for me because of my

current reputation,” Felicia offered as she came down the stairs and into the foyer to join her parents.

“My dear, you still have a chance to marry a nobleman,” Lord Casey said, trying to be encouraging.

“But wouldn’t it be best that I simply marry so I won’t be a spinster?” Felicia retorted. “Surely my dowry will be enough to allow me to live comfortably in a small home with a businessman for a husband.”

“Felicia, you don’t know what you are talking about,” Lady Casey said as she flipped back her curly blonde hair. “You have servants at your beck and call. Imagine the work you’d be forced to do if your husband were only a businessman. Your dowry won’t last you forever.”

“But I don’t need a big townhouse like this to be happy,” Felicia said, gesturing around. “I don’t need fine gowns and dozens of servants. Surely two or three plus a cook would be plenty for a small home.”

“My dear, I am afraid you don’t know what will make you happy,” Lord Casey said with a shake of his head. “You’ve even stopped drawing.”

“Let us go,” Lady Casey interrupted, sighing. “I wish to arrive at the dance.”

Felicia held her tongue as she followed her parents out of the house. She wished her parents would for once see her perspective. More so, if Ernest was going to ask her father for her hand in marriage, she wanted her parents to be prepared for such a request.

The biggest thing Felicia still had to decide was if Ernest moved forward with his proposal, would she accept? She had enjoyed their time together while he'd painted her portrait; it almost reminded her of the time they'd spent at the duke's house while he'd taught her to paint. She had begun to remember why she had fallen in love with Ernest, and all she was willing to risk to be with him.

Felicia still knew in her heart that the life her parents had was not the life she wanted for herself. She didn't want to marry someone she didn't love, and she didn't aspire to be like her mother. She didn't need fancy gowns, a great social life, nor the desire to sleep with young men. Instead, Felicia simply wanted to be free from her parents and what society expected of her. Sometimes she wondered if she could still find that type of freedom with Ernest. Yet, she couldn't get over the fact that he'd left her.

Once the Caseys made their way by carriage to the dance hall, Felicia was surprised still that her parents were going through with attending such a social function below their station. The dance hall was not the magnificent buildings in the fashionable part of Town. Instead, the wooden structure that stood before them appeared to be more like a large tavern than a dance hall. All sorts of people streamed in and out of the open double doors while a cheerful melody played inside.

"My word, it looks quite crowded," Lord Casey said, looking about.

"There are more people here than I expected," Lady Casey added.

"I suppose it won't be too bad once we get inside and find a comfortable place," Felicia encouraged. She wanted to see Ernest, to dance with him that evening. To perhaps even talk with him in private

if the opportunity arose.

“Oh no, I think I see Lady Diggins,” Lady Casey spoke as they neared the door. “If we are seen, then there will be no way to turn back now.”

“Then let us press forth,” Lord Casey said softly.

Felicia followed behind her parents as they slowly made their way inside the dance hall. She was thrilled by the sight of it all, of the masses gathered together as social classes mixed as though there was no such thing as class division. Her eyes roamed the rustic dance hall filled with candlelight and lanterns to cast plenty of light around the space. It was not at all like any ball she’d ever been to as people dressed commonly and spoke merely with one another.

“I’m going to find us some drinks,” Lord Casey called over his shoulder before he disappeared into the crowd. Felicia smirked as she steered her mother towards a corner of the room where it was less crowded and there was a settee for her to sit comfortably.

“I am starting to regret my decision,” Lady Casey said. But then Lady Diggins came to them and sat next to her mother.

“Oh, how lovely to see you this evening, Lady Casey,” Lady Diggins said happily. “Isn’t this a breath of fresh air to be amongst the common folk? Surely there are no gossip mills here and we may act more freely than amongst the Ton.”

“Oh, yes, Lady Diggins. What a wonderful social event,” Lady Casey

said with a forced smile. "Lord Casey has gone to get us some punch."

"You may be disappointed when all he can find is ale from the brewery on the other side of the dance hall," Lady Diggins said, opening her fan and fanning her face. "It is a dark ale, but very hardy."

"Oh, I see," Lady Casey spoke, trying to keep her composure.

Felicia stood to the side of her mother, wanting the advantage of standing to see as far as she could. There was surely a merriment of people all around as many partook in the dance that was currently happening. A small orchestra of musicians was on the stage on the other side of the dancehall, playing a melody that really got people moving. There were clapping and applauding, something Felicia wouldn't have seen at a ball. It was as though everyone was invested in the music and dance instead of caring who was present and who wore the most gorgeous gown.

Lord Casey eventually made his way through the crowd to where they were situated. He handed his wife a large tanker of ale, something Felicia was sure her mother had never had before. She couldn't help her smile as she watched her mother take a small sip and frown.

"It's not sherry," she said, looking up at her husband. This made Lady Diggins chuckle while Felicia tried hard not to laugh.

"No, my dear. But it is rather good," Lord Casey said, taking a long drink before turning his eyes to those dancing. "Two more of these, and I might try my hand at dancing as well. There seem to be dancers of all ages."

“I don’t think I’ve danced in years,” Lady Diggins said with a chuckle.

“Maybe you just haven’t had the right dance partner,” Lord Casey suggested. She blushed as she fanned her face.

Felicia paid the married folk little attention as she moved her eyes around the crowd, searching for Ernest’s face. It was hard when the entire dancehall was crowded and the volume of the merriment quite loud.

“I am going to go explore the rest of the dancehall,” Felicia said, turning to her mother.

“Just please don’t go far,” Lady Casey replied as she continued sipping her ale, looking quite desperate to try to relax. “And, of course, don’t leave the dancehall.”

“Of course, Mother. I shall return shortly after my exploration,” Felicia said with a smile.

Taking her time, Felicia walked the perimeter of the dancefloor. She watched the happy dancers, all of who seemed so carefree. She was sure she was wearing one of the finest gowns, even though she had tried her best to dress down for the occasion. It was only her mother and Lady Diggins that rivalled her. For once, Felicia wanted to blend in instead of standing out so she could pretend for one night she wasn’t a young lady of elite status. She was simply a young lady who wanted to have fun.



“Good evening, My Lady,” came a familiar voice. Felicia turned to see that Ernest had found her and was standing behind her.

“Good evening, Mr Simmons,” Felicia replied with a smile. “Fancy seeing you here.”

“You as well,” he said with a knowing smile. He bowed to her, and she inclined her head in reply. “Would you care to dance?”

“I would love to dance,” Felicia replied.

“Then I will enquire of your parents that I might have the honour of dancing with you,” Ernest replied, offering his arm to her. Felicia accepted it, for a moment being able to pretend that Ernest was a nobleman and not just a merchant or tradesman. For one night, Felicia could pretend all sorts of things if only to feel some sort of happiness and freedom.

“Good evening, Lord and Lady Casey,” Ernest said as they approached her parents. Felicia dropped her arm from his as he bowed. “I wish to ask permission to dance with Lady Felicia.”

“Mr Simmons, it is good to see you,” Lord Casey said in greeting as Ernest righted his posture once more.

“Yes, it is good to see you,” Lady Casey added, her eyes travelling Ernest’s figure in female appreciation. “I see no reason not to deny such a request.” She looked towards her husband for confirmation.

“In this setting, I don’t see the harm in agreeing to dance. The social classes are quite muddled tonight,” Lord Casey said, observing the crowd. “I do say, I think I see a few of my business associates present.” This distracted Lord Casey so much that he walked off into the crowd with his tankard, seeming to be determined to approach his associates to understand why they were present.

“Shall we?” Ernest asked, offering his arm to Felicia once more. She nodded in reply, resting her hand on his arm as he guided her towards the dance. ‘

It took a moment to find their footing to join the others, but once they began, it was easy to follow right along. A bright smile came to Felicia’s face as she danced along with Ernest. He was a surprisingly good dance partner, someone who clearly had been practicing. Felicia would have to compliment him after the dance came to an end.

Every time Felicia’s eyes looked into Ernest’s as they danced, she felt a chill run down her spine. When they lightly touched, that part of her bare skin felt as though it was on fire. Their movements together reminded her of their special night together. All of the feelings she had for Ernest seemed to come quickly back to mind, causing her to deeply blush as they stepped together through the dance.

When the music came to an end, the crowd turned towards the musicians and applauded. It was something Felicia had never done before, but she enjoyed clapping along with the crowd to give the small orchestra credit for such good music. Then, small groups started to form as the conversation continued amongst the dancers, all seeming to smile and laugh without restraint. Felicia had yet to see a young lady cover her smile or laughter, thinking that this crowd was certainly carefree and not worried about social standards.

“Would you care to return to your parents’ side?” Ernest asked, standing close to her so Felicia could hear him speak clearly.

“I’m sure that it would be the proper thing to do, but I would not care to do so,” Felicia said. “I feel as though I could become lost in this crowd easily and be free of them for an evening.”

“Then let us become lost,” Ernest suggested, offering his arm to Felicia. “We can go for a small tankard of ale, and I may be able to introduce you to the other businessmen I’ve met since opening my shop.”

“I would enjoy that,” Felicia said, thinking a new adventure would suit her well. She followed Ernest’s lead as they walked carefully through the crowd. There were two tables set up at the back corner of the dancehall where the local brewmaster was sampling their ale for the patrons. Ernest bought them both a small tankard of ale along with a wooden basket of bread.

“It’s best to eat while drinking ale,” Ernest explained as they found a small table on the opposite side of the hall where Felicia suspected her parents to be.

“I was surprised that my parents agreed to attend such a function. But I think both my mother and father have found people of a similar station in society to socialize with,” Felicia said as they sat down to eat and drink together. “This is the most fun at a social function that I’ve ever been to.”

“I am glad that you are enjoying yourself,” Ernest said as he picked apart the bread before taking a bite. “It is interesting how we can both

be seen together in a public place like this, and no one really cares.”

“That is why I have never been opposed to marrying below my station. Life seems less stressful in the lower classes. There are not as many rules to follow,” Felicia stated, taking a bit of bread herself and eating it before sipping the ale. She found it to be hardy like Lady Diggins had explained, and quite delicious.

“There are different things to stress about at this level in society,” Ernest said. “I may be able to socialize with people of all standings, but I worry about things such as money and work.”

“But you are clearly an instant success,” Felicia pointed out. “With one or two fellow painters, you would be able to progress.”

“Or perhaps a wife who was also a talented painter?” Ernest suggested.

Felicia stilled as she looked at Ernest. She picked up her small tankard and took a sip while she considered her words.

“I suppose that would suit your needs,” Felicia said.

“And would it suit yours?” Ernest asked in reply.

“I ... I don’t know anymore,” Felicia said. “I haven’t even considered drawing or painting after what happened.”

“But you have to understand that I did this all for you?” Ernest said, reaching across the table and taking her hand in his. She pulled away from him, worrying who might see them together.

“I suppose I’m starting to see that ... I just worry.”

“What worries you?” Ernest asked, looking at her seriously.

“What if people find out who you truly are?” Felicia asked.

“Would it matter if we are married?” Ernest asked with a smirk. Felicia blushed, looking away from him as she saw that another dance had started. The melody filled the hall, mixing with the conversations that continued. Felicia wasn’t sure what to think about Ernest’s words. He was making his intention quite clear to her, but would she still accept him after all the pain she’d felt.

“You need to gain my father’s permission first,” Felicia said, looking back at Ernest.

“And if he says yes?”

“Then you will have my answer,” Felicia replied, knowing she still needed to decide for herself what she would say.

“Then if he says no?” Ernest asked, tearing the piece of bread and

taking another bite.

“Then you shall have my answer either way,” Felicia said with a nod. She finished the rest of the bread before sipping her ale. She took a chance and finished the drink quickly, needing a bit of liquid courage.

“Fancy seeing you two here,” came a voice that Felicia thought she’d never hear again. She turned and looked up at Miss Mathews, surprised to see her and to realize how tired she looked. Her long brown hair was braided and tucked up into a bun. She wore a dark brown gown that had seen better days.

“Miss Mathews,” Felicia said softly, trying to determine if she was really seeing her old friend. “Whatever happened to you?”

“Betrayal,” she replied, clasping her hands in front of her as she looked at Ernest. “And I will get what I want in the end, or else.”

“What are you threatening about?” Ernest asked, standing to his feet.

“Marry me, or I will tell everyone tonight who you really are,” she hissed, her voice soft. Felicia watched as her hands balled into fists.

“Would you really want a loveless marriage where I despise you the rest of my days, unwilling to touch you or even look at you?” Ernest was quick to ask, forcing Miss Mathews to step back as he towered over her.

“If I can’t have you, then no one can,” Miss Mathews said, tears in her eyes. “You know I cared for him, and yet you still laid with him.” As she spoke, she turned her eyes on Felicia, making her worry about who would overhear the conversation in such a crowded room.

“Leave now and never approach us again,” Ernest said, getting Miss Mathews’ attention. “If I ever see you again, I’ll report you as a madwoman.” Shock filled her eyes as she took several steps back. Felicia watched as her old friend turned and then hurried from the dancehall. In the woman’s current state, it wouldn’t be hard to convince a constable of her madness.

“Are you alright?” Ernest asked, turning his attention to Felicia. She stood and nodded.

“Yes, I think I am,” Felicia said, shivering after what had happened despite the heat of the room.

“Has she approached you since you returned to Town?” he asked.

Felicia shook her head. “No. I had no idea what had happened to her,” Felicia confessed.

“She’s come to my shop once before,” Ernest admitted. “I had dearly hoped she hadn’t recognized me.”

“She spent as much time with you as I did,” Felicia said. “I had recognized you easily enough.”

“That is because you know me. And it seems Miss Mathews had expected something of me from our time together,” Ernest said, shaking his head. “Perhaps I should wait to speak with your father until I am sure Miss Mathews won’t bother us again.”

“I will leave you to that digression,” Felicia decided, unsure of how her father would react either way. She still wasn’t sure what she would say when the time came for her to decide. She liked how Ernest had stood up to Miss Mathews and hadn’t buckled underneath the fear of her threat. This, at least, Felicia could be proud of.

Ernest picked up his tankard and drained the rest before setting the metal cup back on the table. He smiled at Felicia as he offered her his arm. She accepted, resting her hand on his forearm as he led her around the crowd back over to her parents.

Felicia could see that her mother was happily engaged in talking with a handful of women of various social standings and that her father was happily talking with his business associates. As they neared, Felicia dropped her hand from Ernest’s arm and went to stand by her mother.

“Oh, Felicia darling, I am having such an enjoyable evening,” Lady Casey said, a bright smile on her face. Felicia could see that her cheeks were quite rosy red, making her think her mother had drunk much of the ale.

“I am pleased you are enjoying yourself, Mother. I would agree that I have enjoyed dancing with Mr Simmons and being able to converse with him,” Felicia said.



“Ah, yes. Mr Simmons is such a charming young man. Handsome, too. It is too bad he is not a nobleman for you,” Lady Casey said, lowering her voice.

“Regardless of his status in society, do you not think him a good match for me,” Felicia pressed, sitting down on a chair near her mother so they could speak quietly while the other women around them continued to chatter.

“But you deserve more than just a tradesman,” Lady Casey pressed.

“Mother, I deserve to be happy,” Felicia retorted. “I think Mr Simmons would make me happy. I would be able to paint to my heart’s content and be proud of my husband’s work.”

“How can you tell when you’ve only just met the man this past week?” Lady Casey asked, shaking her head.

“A feeling is all,” Felicia replied. “But it would be nice to know that I had you and Father’s support.”

“I suppose we can discuss this matter if Mr Simmons does actually show any intention. He was very frank with me about a woman he already had intentions for. I would hate you to be heartbroken again,” Lady Casey stated.

“Of course, Mother,” Felicia said with a nod. She watched as Ernest engaged in conversation with her father and the other associates. They were all laughing merrily, and she even saw her father introduce Ernest to his associates, which she thought was a good sign. Then,

when Ernest gestured towards a more private spot in their little corner, Felicia's heart started to pound. She had a very good idea of what Ernest was about to say to her father.

Felicia pulled out her fan and started to fan her face as she tried to keep her breathing steady. She had to remind herself that her father would no doubt not accept the offer of marriage because of Ernest's status. She knew not to hope for much, instead to expect to be disappointed. Therefore, she pulled her eyes from the two of them and looked towards the dancing, thinking if anything she had enjoyed her time with Ernest tonight. Even with Miss Mathews' hasty threat.

"Felicia!" her father called, startling her. She looked towards him and was at least relieved that her father didn't look angry. She stood from her chair and hurried over to the pair of them as she put her fan away.

"My dear, Mr Simmons has extended an offer of marriage towards you," Lord Casey declared. "I wish to know your opinion." Felicia was surprised to hear that her father wanted her opinion. After all, he hadn't asked what she thought in the past. Perhaps the ale had gone to his head?

"I don't expect to receive an offer of marriage from a nobleman because of the scandal. Therefore, I do believe that Mr Simmons' offer is a sound one. I enjoy his company and do believe he could make me happy," Felicia admitted.

"But you would not live in comfort as you do now," her father stated.

"I am not afraid of that, Father. I do not desire the life you and Mother have given me," Felicia said, raising her chin.

“You may be expected to work depending on the wealth of your husband,” Lord Casey stated, folding his arm over his chest. Felicia glanced towards Ernest, seeing the smirk on his lips. She could tell that he was currently confident.

“I am not afraid of work, either. I know I have a high dowry that will help me to live comfortably, and I would be happy to paint landscapes to help my husband’s business,” Felicia decided, a sense of excitement starting to run through her. She had just a bit of hope starting to bloom in her chest.

“In that case, Felicia, what do you say to this man’s offer?” Lord Casey finally asked.

“I will accept his offer, Father,” Felicia said with a smile, looking towards Ernest. A bright smile crossed his features, indicating the happiness at his words.

“Then come morning, I shall post it in the papers,” Lord Casey decided. “I can’t promise you a large wedding reception because of what people will say once they hear you’re marrying a commoner. But considering what you’ve been through, I believe this is an acceptable solution to your problem.”

“Thank you, Father,” Felicia said, happiness bubbling up in her chest. “I know I will be very happy with Mr Simmons.”

“I sure hope so, my dear,” Lord Casey said, giving her a light embrace before turning to Ernest and shaking hands with them. Felicia turned and called for her mother who stood slowly and joined them. She

could tell that her mother was just a bit tipsy by the way she walked.

“What is it, my dear?” Lady Casey asked as she brushed back her hair.

“Father has agreed to Mr Simmons’ offer of marriage,” Felicia announced with a smile. She watched as her mother’s expression stilled. Then, her eyes became quite wide.

“You cannot be serious,” she directed to her husband.

“I am quite serious, my dear. Felicia will marry, her reputation will stay intact as a lady, and she will enjoy the life she has chosen for herself,” Lord Casey declared. “Mr Simmons has shown great professionalism in our house and has been a true gentleman, despite your best efforts. I think he is perfect for Felicia.”

Felicia watched as her mother blushed deeply. She brushed her hair back, trying to look unaffected by her husband’s words.

“I know we have only known each other for a short time, but I have become quite fond of Lady Felicia and would promise to also put her happiness before my own. Though I am not a nobleman, I still have much to offer her,” Ernest said, cutting into the conversation to add his assurance to the situation.

“I will hold you to that, Mr Simmons,” Lord Casey said, giving Ernest a stern look. Ernest nodded in reply.

Felicia could hardly believe what was happening. Ernest had not only convinced her father to agree to the marriage, but she had as well. She looked at Ernest, thinking about what their life together was going to look like. She thought about spending her days painting, helping Ernest with his business. Together they would truly be successful, and she would find happiness in a life they would create together.

Ernest and Felicia enjoyed another dance together before she went home with her parents. She wanted to stay longer, to sneak a kiss from Ernest. But she was reassured in knowing that one day soon they would be married. It was more than Felicia could ever hope for.

## Chapter 23

Ernest felt as though he was walking on clouds when he left the dancehall and made his way down the street to his own shop. The distance wasn't far, and the fresh night air felt good after being in the stuffy dancehall that had been quite warm with so many people in attendance. He felt as though he could spend the rest of the night painting; he was filled with so much energy and excitement at the thought of now being able to marry the love of his life.

A soft glow immolated from his shop's front as Ernest turned down the main road and down the alleyway. At first, he cursed himself for having left on a candle. But as he neared, he realized that the glow was much more than just a candle. Worry and fear gripped him as he ran the rest of the way to his shop and saw that the front door was open and a small fire was engulfing his shop.

"Dear Lord, no!" Ernest cried out as he dashed inside his shop and saw that the fire was coming from his workshop in the back. He grabbed the mop bucket of water and threw it on the fire before taking off his vest and starting to beat the fire and stump it out. The blaze was too much for him to handle.

Ernest was forced to grab his mop bucket and dash to the well outside, but on the way, he collided with a figure in the darkness. He went tumbling to the ground, landing hard on his side as he grabbed for the figure. A female voice cried out in pain as he wrestled the figure, pinning them to the ground as he got the upper hand and pressed his knee into their chest.

"Get off of me!" screamed the woman. He instantly recognized her as Miss Mathews.

"I'll have you hanged for trying to burn down my home," Ernest roared, getting off the woman and pulling her to her feet by her shoulder.

"You deserve to burn. The both of you!" she shouted, trying to swing a fist at his head. But Ernest dodged it, instead dragging Miss Mathews outside and towards the well.

"You either help me stop the fire, or I will make sure your family watches you hang from the gallows," Ernest threatened, handing her a bucket as he lowered another down into the well.

"They don't care about me anymore," she spat. "No one does."

"Look at the way you are acting. Like a madwoman," Ernest said, quickly filling the bucket and handing it to Miss Mathews for the empty one. "Now go douse the fire, or you will die a madwoman."

Miss Mathews said nothing as she went to do as bid. She was wailing as though she was in great pain, no doubt fighting her instincts to burn down his home in the first place. After a few buckets full of water tossed on the fire in combination with Ernest stumping out the fire with his boots, they were finally able to coax the fire down.

Ernest lit a few lanterns in his shop and took them to his workroom. The fire had scorched the entire room, burning the painting he had almost finished, as well as ruining all of his painting supplies and brushes. He didn't know what he was going to do when he had paintings he needed to complete for elite families. In the morning, he would need to venture to the various shops to try to recoup everything

that had burned.

“What is the point of causing me more harm when I have done nothing to you?” Ernest snapped, turning on Miss Mathews after surveying all the damage.

“I was happy with you. I enjoyed our time together. I thought you loved me, too,” she wailed between her sobs.

“I never returned your affections,” he bellowed. “And this is how you treat a man you supposedly love?”

“I wanted you to hurt as you caused me to hurt,” she cried.

“You’ve hurt yourself with your false reality. Now my reality is that I must replace what has been burned. I must repair this damage before my landlord finds out and throw me out,” Ernest said, feeling such great anxiety falling over him. He would need to check the upstairs apartment to see if there had been any damage above.

“If I ever see you again, I will make sure that you hang,” Ernest said, feeling beyond angry at Miss Mathews, even though she’d had a change of heart and helped him to stop the fire.

“Please ... I can’t keep living like this. There must be something I can do for you. I can be your servant and help out around here,” Miss Mathews said, drying her eyes.



“Lady Felicia’s parents have accepted my offer of marriage,” Ernest confessed. “It would not be proper if I took you on as a servant.” Ernest watched as the colour drained out of Miss Mathew’s face, her lips parting in shock.

“Then there really is no hope for us,” she said, lowering her eyes.

“You could help me clean my workroom and be gone by morning’s light. Leave Town and start your life over,” Ernest said. “That is what I did, and so far it has worked well for me.”

Miss Mathews only nodded before she moved towards the burnt rubble of the workroom. Together they collected all the burnt bits of painting supplies, furniture, and structure of the room. Ernest carefully took the rubble to the waste bins while wearing his leather gloves as not to be burned by the pieces that were still hot like coals.

Miss Mathews carried in buckets of water and began to scrub clean all the soot in the room. When everything was cleared out, Ernest found some extra pieces of wood in the cellar that he used to secure the room’s structure.

When the work was all done, he turned to Miss Mathews and said, “I don’t know what items you have left in your possession or how much money you have, but I would suggest a good night’s rest and a hearty meal before you set out. You can go to any faraway village and completely recreate your story. Find a young man to marry and start a family.”

“I wish you and Felicia the best,” Miss Mathews replied softly. Ernest nodded in reply as he went to the front door and held it open. He stood there and watched the miserable woman walk down the street

and out of view. It was only then that he went back inside his shop and locked the door before surveying the damage in the workshop once more.

As he looked around the space, Ernest knew that the best thing to do would be to whitewash the room and maybe put on some wallpaper. In the morning, he would need to go to different shops to collect his art supplies once more. There would be hard work to do, but he couldn't really complain. His entire shop hadn't burnt down, he'd been able to catch the person who wished him ill will, and he felt he might be able to move on from his past now that Miss Mathews had been sent away.

Ernest blew out all the lanterns beside one as he took the last of them, using it as a guiding light as he went upstairs to his apartment. There, he threw open all the windows to let out the smoky air. There was a thickness to the smell of smoke in his apartment, making him think he'd have to scrub the area clean just to get the smell out of his things.

With the windows fully open and his lantern hanging from the hook on the rafters, Ernest peered out into the night. The town still sounded alive with activity though the clock on the mantel read almost one in the morning. He knew for sure that today would be one that he would never forget.

He'd not only convinced Felicia's parents to accept his offer of marriage, he had rid Miss Mathews of his future with Felicia. A part of him pitied the madwoman, and more so was grateful that he wouldn't have to worry about her ever again. If she did show up back in their life, he would swiftly turn her in as a madwoman.

Though feeling he had a full list of things he needed to get done, Ernest made his way to the bedroom to get a few hours of sleep before sunrise. He felt exhausted from all the cleaning he had to do and the

feelings of anxiety and worry slowly seeping out of him. It left him feeling tired, even with the sense of urgency he still had inside him. As soon as his head hit his pillow, he was asleep.

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Felicia felt all sorts of jitters when she woke the next morning. She stretched leisurely in bed, trying to release some of the excitement that coursed through her. She was looking forward to the day, to planning the wedding with her mother, and readying the announcement in the papers. It might take a few days to post, but she couldn't wait to read the ad detailing her soon to be married to Ernest.

A soft knocking on the door announced the arrival of her lady's maid. Felicia sat up in the bed as she called the maid to enter. She thought about the fact that one day soon she wouldn't necessarily have a lady's maid. She would need to rise on her own accord, dress, and get prepared for the day on her own. But then she reminded herself that she wouldn't be alone. She would be with Ernest.

"Good morning, My Lady. I hope you slept well," her lady's maid said in greeting. Mrs Franks was an older woman that had been assigned to assist her.

"Yes, I certainly am restful," Felicia agreed as she got out of bed and sat on the padded chair to have her long hair brushed.

"Cook has prepared a splendid breakfast for you and the family. It seems the earl and countess are having a rough morning after much consumption," Mrs Franks explained. Felicia sighed, hoping her parents didn't have terrible headaches and would be grouchy all day. She was too excited and happy to have to deal with their poor

attitudes.

“Thank you for letting me know,” Felicia replied.

Once her hair was brushed, and she was changed in a simple day gown, Felicia made her way downstairs to the dining room. She was rather eager to start discussing the wedding plans and to no doubt invite Ernest to dinner so they could complete the arrangements. She wanted to be married as soon as possible to start her life over as a married woman and painter.

“Good morning,” Felicia happily said as she came into the dining room. She saw her parents seated at the table, frowns on their faces as they ate small bites of food and sipped tonics that would no doubt curb their hangovers.

“Morning, my dear,” Lady Casey said softly as Felicia was seated at the table.

Felicia did her best to remain quiet as she was served by the footman. She was famished but took her time eating as she waited for her parents to wake up a bit more. After the hot tea was served and her parents looked content with the little amount they had eaten, she spoke up.

“Father, have you written to the papers yet this morning?” Felicia asked, making sure to speak softly.

“Whatever for?” Lord Casey asked.

“Father, don’t tease,” Felicia said with a light chuckle. “I know it is not common, but I assure you that I am very happy with the match.”

“Match?” Lady Casey asked. “What sort of match do you speak of?”

Felicia stared at both of her parents, wondering if they were playing a trick on her. But their faces looked so quizzical that she began to fear instead.

“I was given an offer of marriage last night, and Father, you agreed to the match,” Felicia explained. “As have I.”

“A material match?” Lady Casey asked excitedly. “Oh, what wonderful news.”

“Don’t tell me the two of you drank so much that you don’t remember?” Felicia complained.

“I will admit that my memory is a bit foggy from the night before,” said Lord Casey sheepishly.

“It is no problem; who is the man?” Lady Casey quickly asked, a small smile coming to her face.

“Mr Simmons,” Felicia happily said. “He asked for my hand in marriage with Father, who agreed, and I accepted.”

Felicia's heart began to pound in her chest as she watched both her parents still. The smile slipped from her mother's face, and her father stared at her as though she had a horn growing from her forehead. Her fears started to unravel at their reaction.

"Felicia, you must be joking," Lord Casey said. "Why would I agree for you to marry a man that isn't of noble birth?"

"As I explained last night, Father, I would be very happy with Mr Simmons. And, it may be the only offer of marriage I will ever receive," Felicia explained.

"Do you have feelings for this man? The two of you have only just met last week," Lady Casey protested.

"I do feel an attraction towards him, yes," Felicia admitted.

"Sleeping with a servant has certainly lowered your standards," Lady Casey said, shaking her head.

"You must be sour only because you couldn't convince him to sleep with you," Felicia retorted. "Father, that was the reason you agreed because Mother couldn't seduce him. You felt confident that he would always treat me well and be loyal to me because he wasn't able to fall for Mother's charms."

"I feel as though I do recollect such a conversation," Lord Casey said,

running his fingers through his greying brown hair. "But do you honestly expect me to honour such an agreement when Mr Simmons is just a tradesman?"

"Yes, Father, I do. I would greatly like to marry Mr Simmons and expect both of you to honour what was said last night, even if you two drank too much to remember," Felicia said, feeling as though this was the moment she needed to stand up for what she wanted in life.

"You won't have the lifestyle you have now," Lady Casey stated.

"I don't want the lifestyle I have now," Felicia said, focusing on her mother. "I don't desire silk gowns, social events, and a fashionable house. I want a simple life, spending my days painting, and being proud of what I can create with my own hands."

Her parents stared at her as though she had just told them that she really wasn't their child and perhaps had been switched at birth. It was hard for Felicia to keep her composure as she faced both of her distraught parents at the same time.

"Felicia, all I keep thinking is that you truly don't understand what you are asking for," Lord Casey said, shaking his head.

"Father, I am not a child. I do know what I want, or I wouldn't have agreed to the marriage," Felicia said, her voice rising slightly in volume till her parents both winced in pain. "I expect you to still write to notify the papers of the engagement."

"I need to speak to Mr Simmons," Lord Casey replied. "I must hear

from his own mouth that this has happened and not some game you are playing.”

“Fine then,” Felicia said, standing to her feet. “Send an errand boy to collect the man. He will tell you that I am not lying.”

“Felicia, lower your voice,” Lady Casey tsked. “You are sounding like a banshee.”

Felicia scoffed as she turned and left the room in a hurry. She made her way across the hallway to the drawing room, close enough to the dining room that she could hear her parents speak still.

“You don’t think she’s telling the truth do you?” Lady Casey asked.

“She seems quite determined ... and I do have a faint memory of speaking with Mr Simmons towards the end of the night,” Lord Casey admitted. “I do think she speaks the truth.”

“Well, send for Mr Simmons. We should speak to him right away to ensure Felicia isn’t trying to play any tricks,” her mother said with a sigh. “I don’t want Felicia to throw her life away.”

“Yet, this may very well be her only offer of marriage. And, she doesn’t seem to be too upset that a tradesman was the one who made the offer,” Lord Casey countered.

Felicia smirked as she moved further into the drawing room and



towards the painting of herself. She wasn't a vain person to often look upon her likeness, but as she observed the painting closely, she could see elements of Ernest in it. The way the paint was brushed across the painting and the layers of colours really made the painting come to life. This was a fine example of what Ernest was capable of. She was certainly proud to become his wife and continue painting with him.

Felicia passed the drawing room as she waited for some sign of Ernest. Her parents hadn't come to join her just yet, making her wonder what the two of them were up to. After a while, she heard someone approaching as her hopes continued to rise and fall. There was soft conversation coming from the hallway, and Felicia forced herself to sit down before her nerves got the best of her.

"Come right this way, Mr Simmons," Lord Casey said, gesturing towards the drawing room. Felicia smiled as Ernest came into the room with her father. She was so excited to see him that she was certain her heart would burst.

"Good morning, Lady Felicia," Ernest said in greeting, bowing before her.

"Good morning, Mr Simmons," Felicia replied, rising and curtsying.

"Thank you for coming to my home on such a short occasion," Lord Casey said, gesturing for them all to sit. "I do not feel proud to admit this, but my memory is a bit fuzzy from last night due to the ale."

"I see, My Lord," Ernest said, taking a seat across from Lord Casey. Felicia studied him, seeing how tired he appeared. She started to wonder if something was amiss. "Which parts of last night do you not remember?"

“It seems the part where you asked for my daughter’s hand in marriage, and I accepted,” Lord Casey explained. “Felicia notified us this morning, and I feel foolish to say I don’t remember.”

“I can attest, Lord Casey, that your daughter speaks the truth. I had asked for her hand in marriage, and you did agree once Lady Felicia had agreed to the offer,” Ernest confirmed, a smile on his lips. Felicia smiled, feeling so happy at that moment.

“You must understand how uncommon this sort of thing is,” Lord Casey stated. “For a lady of such high standing to marry someone who isn’t even of noble birth.”

“Yet I will always treat Lady Felicia as a woman of title. I don’t plan to subjugate her to any sort of labour besides that of which she desires,” Ernest said, looking at Felicia and smiling. “If my business continues to bloom, in just a short year, I shall be able to relocate to a more popular part of town with a shop and home big enough for a growing family.”

“I suppose as long as you are happy?” Lord Casey asked, turning towards Felicia.

“I am, Father. More than I have ever been in my life,” Felicia admitted proudly.

“Then I suppose the only thing that is left for me to do is to write the papers,” Lord Casey said, chuckling. “I certainly had not expected this, but perhaps this goes to show that I should not be consuming such

spirits again.”

Felicia couldn't help chuckling as well as her father stood. She wasn't so sure of his words that he would cut back on his consumption, but this had been a good example of what he might want to be aware of in the future. Especially if he was going to continue meeting with his business associates, who might want to take advantage of him.

Felicia went to Ernest then, joining hands with him as she felt a wealth of joy enveloping her. She would have never dreamed of this moment, but now that it had been confirmed, she was happy that soon she be his wife.

“I had panicked when Mother and Father had forgotten about last night,” Felicia confessed.

“It seems everything is in order now,” Ernest said, squeezing her hands to reassure her. “But I must tell you what transpired last night when I had returned to the shop.” Felicia's suspicions seemed valid as she listened to his terrifying story.

“Do you think she's gone for good?” Felicia asked.

“I do believe so,” Ernest said with a nod. “It is a tragedy, but I do believe all will be well now.”

“I do hope so,” Felicia said with a nod. “Now, I must not keep you any longer. It seems you have a busy day ahead of you.”

“Yes, I do,” Ernest agreed as he let go of her hands. “But I will see you again soon.”

“That I am sure of,” Felicia said brightly.

It was hard for Felicia to see Ernest go, but in her heart, she knew that it wouldn't be forever. One day soon, they would marry and set all things right.

## Chapter 24

“You have truly amazed me how far you’ve come in such a short time,” Daniel Roberts said as he stood together with Ernest at the front of the church.

“I told you I was determined,” Ernest replied, a smile on his lips. “I’ve dreamed of becoming a renowned painter for such a long time that when I finally took the opportunity to do just that, I already had a plan in mind. Now, everyone in Town knows the name, Edward Simmons.”

“Do you regret not being able to use your real name?” Daniel asked, leaning in close to Ernest and whispering.

“No, I don’t,” Ernest assured. “That is a man of my past. I am a new man now with my entire future ahead of me.”

“Though I can’t agree that what you and Lady Felicia chose to do together was right, I am glad to see where it has led you. And to think you convinced her parents to let you marry their daughter. That is surely unheard of,” Daniel said.

“I think the ale that night had a lot to do with it,” Ernest admitted. “But I am excited to be married to Felicia. My heart is hers alone, and there is much I have to look forward to with her at my side.”

“And in turn, I am happy for you. I can say I have fulfilled your father’s wishes to ensure that you will be well taken care of after his

passing,” Daniel said, looking pleased.

“You have been a good friend to me, Daniel. But you should have a seat with your wife before Felicia’s parents arrive at the church. I wouldn’t want them to think that we know one another,” Ernest suggested.

“Well, perhaps I am just speaking to you about commissioning a painting?” Daniel said with a chuckle.

“That would be a good conversation for the wedding breakfast,” Ernest replied.

“Very well,” Daniel said, patting Ernest on the back before he went to sit with his wife in the first pew.

Ernest was happy that his close friend had been able to attend the wedding on such short notice. Though Lord and Lady Casey would assume that the duke’s presence was because Felicia was good friends with the duchess, he and Felicia would surely know the truth.

The Duke and Duchess of Montgomery were the only other people besides himself and the priest present at the church. The wedding date had been chosen once it was confirmed Daniel and the duchess could attend the ceremony. Though their engagement had been posted in the papers, because of the backlash from society, Felicia and Ernest had decided to have a private wedding with only their close family members present. With his father having passed, Daniel was the closest thing Ernest had to family.

Ernest had received a variable response since his engagement had been posted in the papers. Some of his associates from around the corner came to congratulate him on marrying a lady of such high status. Others, on the other hand, came to tell him their opinion.

“Mr Simmons, it’s just not proper,” had said the wife of a marquess. “Therefore, I won’t be able to fulfill our previous arrangement to have you paint our family portrait.”

“I understand your perspective, My Lady, and I am not offended in the least,” Ernest had replied. His business was doing so well that he wouldn’t hurt to lose a few clients just over what had transpired within the social circles of high society.

Ernest had enjoyed spending his evenings dining with Lord and Lady Casey. Now that he was about to become part of the family, the Caseys had certainly welcomed him with open arms. Lady Casey had stopped trying to flirt with him, while Lord Casey enjoyed humorous topics of discussion from business to the differences in this standing in society that they could make jokes of.

“Mr Simmons, if we were to trade places, I wouldn’t have to put on such a show for my business associates. We are always trying to outdo one another,” Lord Casey had confessed as they sipped brandy together in the parlour after dinner.

“What would be the consequences if you stopped trying to out show these men of business?” Ernest asked, pleased that the earl was willing to confide in him. It felt good to have such light conversations after dinner with a man he could consider a father figure one day.

“I suppose they would talk behind my back and say that I have lost

my spark,” Lord Casey assumed.

“Or, they might become more curious about you and wonder what you have up your sleeve,” Ernest reasoned.

“You speak as though you truly understand,” Lord Casey said with a chuckle.

“You might be born a nobleman and me a commoner, but men are men nonetheless. During my travels abroad, I met many men in various statuses in society. But they all desired the same things,” Ernest said, spinning a tale.

“And what’s that?” Lord Casey asked, seeming intrigued.

“To be accepted and appreciated by their family and no one else,” Ernest said, understanding the relationship between Lord and Lady Casey and their daughter. If there were a way for Ernest to help with that situation, he surely would.

“I suppose I didn’t think of it that way,” Lord Casey said. “Unlike yourself and Felicia, I was not very fond of my wife when we married. It was a marriage of convenience for both our families.”

“And now that you’ve been together for almost two decades, would you say you like your wife more now?” Ernest asked.

“I suppose I do,” Lord Casey said, looking towards the fire that burned



in the fireplace, the cold of winter starting to set in.

“Then I think your wife would appreciate your attention more than your business associates,” Ernest suggested.

“You speak like a man of experience,” Lord Casey teased. “You will surely be a good fit for Felicia. She can be quite stubborn, sometimes.”

Ernest smiled as he stood near the priest in the small church outside of Town. He remembered the memory he had with Lord Casey and felt that he was truly a good fit for Felicia. He couldn’t wait to make things official between the two of them and enjoy the rest of their lives together.

When the church’s back doors opened, and Lady Casey appeared on the other side, Ernest stood at attention. His eyes searched the door as she held it open for her husband and daughter to come through. Then, she hurried down the aisle to the front pew as Lord Casey slowly walked with Felicia next to him, her hand resting on his arm.

Ernest’s lips parted as he took in the splendour of his wife to be. She was dressed in a beautiful dark green gown that rippled down from her slender waist. White lace had been stitched into the hem while gold embroidery trailed from the cuff of her sleeve to the shoulder. Her long golden hair was curled lightly as her hair fell around her shoulders. She was a vision of an angel and someone Ernest was quite proud to marry.

“Who gives this woman to be this man’s wife?” asked the priest in a low voice that echoed throughout the empty church.

“Her mother and I do,” Lord Casey said, setting Felicia’s hands inside of Ernest’s.

He couldn’t help smiling as he looked into Felicia’s hazel eyes as Lord Casey went and sat down. The priest began the ceremony then, a short, sweet, and straight to the point ceremony. It seemed that the priest was also not impressed that a lady of society was marrying so low below her station. But to see Felicia so happy was proof to Ernest that she really did have strong feelings for him still. Even after all they had been through.

“Mr Simmons, do you take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife, so help you God?” asked the priest.

“I do,” Ernest replied, sliding a gold band onto Felicia’s finger that the duke had helped him purchase.

“And do you, Lady Felicia Casey, take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband, so help you God?”

“I do,” Felicia answered, sliding a matching gold band onto Ernest’s ring finger.

“By the very vested in me by Almighty God, I now pronounce you both man and wife,” finished the priest as he closed his book of Common Prayer and turned away from the couple. He seemed rather unimpressed, but it did not matter to Ernest. He leaned forward and kissed Felicia soundly on the lips as the two other couples present applauded.

“Shall we, my dear?” Ernest asked when he broke the sweet kiss, feeling his body react to hers as it once had underneath the branches of a willow tree.

“Yes,” Felicia replied, her cheeks flushed red. She looked darling with her rosy cheeks, and now that he knew they were officially husband and wife, he was beginning to look forward to what their wedding night would be like.

“Oh, my dear. Now that I have seen you marry, I can only think how happy I am for you,” Lady Casey said as they walked towards the two couples that soon stood to their feet.

“Thank you, Mama. I have never been happier,” Felicia said, her arm wrapped around Ernest’s.

“We are both so happy for you,” Lord Casey said, wrapping an arm around his wife. Lady Casey seemed to be surprised by this sign of affection but relaxed into her husband’s touch and even smiled.

“You are such a beautiful bride,” Sierra said, resting a hand on Felicia’s shoulder. “I am so glad we could come to your wedding.”

“It is a great honour to have you both here to witness our marriage,” Ernest spoke up, addressing the duke.

“I have heard of your greeting paintings, Mr Simmons. I must come and visit your shop while we are in Town to commission a painting,” Daniel said, speaking a bit louder than he needed to. It took all of

Ernest's discipline to keep from laughing just as loudly.

"I look forward to your visit, Your Grace," Ernest replied, bowing his head to the man.

After a bit of conversation, the three couples made their way to the Casey household for the breakfast celebration. There was plenty of merriment amongst the six of them, though Ernest wondered if Felicia would have preferred a larger wedding party.

"Are you happy, my dear?" Ernest asked, taking her hand in his as the meal was coming to an end.

"I've never been happier," Felicia said with a bright smile. "I am surrounded by the people that I care about the most and don't have to pretend to be someone I'm not."

"Then you are not upset that there are not more people to celebrate with us today?" Ernest asked, lowering his voice.

"You are the only person I need to celebrate today with," she said. "I do believe we should prepare to leave."

"I am looking forward to showing you where we will be living together for the time being," Ernest said, standing to his feet and offering his hand to Felicia.

"Let us be off then," Felicia agreed.

Together they said their goodbyes to Lord and Lady Casey, along with the Duke and Duchess of Montgomery. Ernest was pleased to have spent the celebration with Daniel, and that through it all, they were still friends.

“Make sure the two of you come and visit us often,” Lady Casey offered. “We truly are not that far away.”

“And in the next few days, I will come and visit this renowned painter’s shop,” the duke declared. Ernest smirked, thinking Daniel was pretty bad at being an actor. But he was glad to know that those closest to them still gave them their support.

Ernest led Felicia outside to a small carriage with two horses, a wedding gift from Lord Casey. They would be lent the carriage and driver for the day so they could ride back to the shop and apartment in comfort. After Ernest made sure his wife was situated in the carriage with her gown tucked around her, he pulled himself up into the vehicle before they both leaned forward and waved at those gathered at the front door of the townhouse.

“I’m so glad that Sierra and Daniel were able to join us today,” Felicia said, folding her hands in her lap as the driver urged the horses forward.

“Yes, that did make the day more pleasant. How are you feeling?” Ernest asked, taking one of her gloved hands in his.

“I am happy and a little nervous,” Felicia admitted.

“What are you nervous about?” Ernest asked.

“Well, it’s been a while since we’ve been together,” she explained.

“Have you already forgotten what it feels like?” Ernest teased, leaning towards her and kissing her temple.

“No ... I don’t think I could ever forget my first time with you,” she replied, turning her head and kissing him in return. Ernest relaxed into the kiss, lifting his hand and cupping the side of her face. She moaned against his lips, causing his member to jump to life. Now Ernest couldn’t wait to return to the shop and show Felicia the apartment. More importantly, their bed.

When the carriage came to a stop, they broke apart. Felicia began to giggle as the driver came down from the bench and opened the door for them. Ernest’s cheeks were red as he stepped down from the carriage and turned around to help his wife alight from the carriage. Thinking of Felicia as his wife filled his heart with so much joy that he thought it might burst.

Ernest held the shop door open for Felicia, ushering her inside. He made sure to lock the door behind him so they wouldn’t be disturbed. This was their first day together, and he wanted to make sure that it was going to be special for Felicia.

“I can hardly believe this is my home now,” Felicia said with a smile, turning around in the space. “I look forward to spending every day together with you, learning how to paint and creating special pieces to

display on the walls.”

“Just being with you makes me happy,” Ernest said, closing the distance between them. He wrapped his arms around Felicia and then lowered his lips to hers. She tipped her head back as she folded into his frame. As he held her close, it was as though she was a perfect fit for him.

“Take me to bed, Ernest,” Felicia said, breaking the kiss. “I cannot wait any longer.”

“As you wish, my love,” Ernest replied, taking Felicia by the hand and leading her up the narrow, wooden stairs. At the top of the stairs, he opened the door to his apartment and led her inside.

“Now, I know it’s not a large space. But I do have plans to move to another building once a suitable one comes available,” Ernest said, feeling a little bit nervous about what his new wife would think of the space.

“I will admit that it is rather small, but I have never desired a big house,” Felicia said, turning to Ernest and smiling. “With a few feminine touches, I think it will do quite well for the time being.”

“I think your gown on the floor will do just well,” Ernest said in a husky voice.

He watched as Felicia’s eyes filled with desire as he came to her and lightly set his hands on her shoulders, turning her around till the back of her gown was exposed to him. He took his time undressing her,

leaning forward to kiss every inch of bare skin that was exposed to him. He listened to her soft moans of pleasure as he helped her out of her clothes. As she stood bare to him, his member pressed eagerly against his trousers.

“My turn,” Felicia said in a voice that was like silk against his body. He loved every minute of her undressing him slowly. When he was rid of all his fine wedding clothes, he took Felicia by the hand and led her to his bedroom.

“I would say that at least it’s not the carpet of the music room,” Felicia said with a giggle.

“Yes, a proper bed will do just fine,” Ernest said, eager to explore all of Felicia without being afraid that they would be discovered or being rushed at all. He had all the time in the world to be with Felicia now that they were going to be together forever. And he was going to savour every last minute of it.

Gently, Ernest laid Felicia down on the bed that he had made with fresh linens for this special moment. Together, they explored every bit of one another, taking their sweet time to experience pleasure unlike either one had ever imagined.



## Epilogue

Felicia never had felt this free in her entire life. She was sitting in the art room, as she liked to call it, while Ernest was up in the front with all the customers. He was much more charming than she was, giving her the time to focus on her own paintings.

The spring was nearing, and life in Town was starting to come alive again. That meant that the shop had become busier with a stream of people that wanted new artwork for their homes.

Ever since she and Ernest had married just a few months ago, Felicia had become the woman she had always dreamed of becoming. She spent her daylight hours painting in the art room while Ernest either talked with customers or left their small abode to complete commission paintings of family portraits. She didn't mind the time she spent alone with herself, enjoying the paintings she was creating and then seeing them proudly hung on the walls of their gallery.

Though it wasn't widely known that Felicia was also a painter and that noblemen were purchasing her paintings just as often as Ernest's, she did not mind that she wasn't gaining the type of reputation her husband was. After all, she did not crave the attention as Ernest did. It was good for business, and thankfully her husband didn't brag about the members of elite status he was socializing with. As a son of an earl and a husband to a refined lady, it had helped Ernest to really rise in popularity.

"My darling, you'll not believe the good news I have just received!" exclaimed Ernest as he came quickly into the art room. Felicia smiled as she carefully set her paintbrush aside, not wanting to drip paint on the snowy landscape painting she was just finishing.

“What is that, my love?” Felicia asked, standing from the stool she’d been sitting on and walking around the table towards her husband. Ernest was holding a sheet of writing paper, a broken wax seal hanging from the page.

“I have just received a letter from the Royal Palace. The Prince Regent has invited us to display one of our pieces in his gallery,” Ernest said, handing the letter to Felicia. Her heart was pounding in her chest as she took the letter and read it carefully.

“My word, you are right,” Felicia said, looking up into Ernest’s blue eyes. “There is a gala in a fortnight. I’m afraid to admit this, but I think I’ll need my mother’s advice on what to wear to the event.” Ernest laughed with Felicia as she embraced him, holding him close.

“I think we should celebrate tonight,” Ernest said as he broke their embrace, keeping his hands on her waist. “I can write to Daniel, and we can share the good news over dinner.”

“Yes, I think that will be a great idea,” Felicia agreed.

“You know ... there aren’t any more patrons in the shop,” Ernest said, a smirk crossing his lips.

“What are you implying?” Felicia asked, raising her right hand and running her fingers through his brown hair that had finally grown back out.

“That we take an early lunch,” Ernest said, his voice like a growl as he tightened his grip on her hips and pulled her closer.

“I like the idea of that,” Felicia agreed. Ernest leaned down and kissed her passionately, making her warm all over just as he broke the kiss to hurry to lock the front door. Felicia turned back to her paints and quickly started putting the tops on all the amber containers of paints to protect them from drying out. By the time she finished, Ernest had returned.

“Should we not head upstairs to our bedroom?” Felicia asked as Ernest came to her and backed her up against the wooden table they used for painting.

“Why waste the time when I would love to enjoy your pleasure right here where we create so much art,” Ernest said in a husky voice.

Excitement ran through Felicia as Ernest leaned down and captured her lips once more. She raised her arms and wrapped them around his shoulders, pulling him close as their tongues danced together. His hands roamed over her body, tugging at her apron till the string came loose and slipped down her body. She felt him pulling at the ties of her gown as her inner core began to become quite moist.

“Oh, Ernest. You never fail to get me so excited for your pleasure,” Felicia said, breaking their kiss as she yearned to be free of her clothes quickly.

“Being with you, loving you each day, these are the things that get me so excited to touch every inch of your bare skin,” Ernest admitted as he helped Felicia out of her gown.

Slowly he peeled her chemise up and over her head, discarding it on the floor with the rest of her clothes. She felt goose flesh appear on her skin as she took her time stripping Ernest out of his trousers, muslin shirt, and undergarments.

When Felicia could free his member from his garments, she couldn't help grasping it with her hands and slowly beginning to massage it. Ernest leaned back his head and hissed with pleasure. If marriage had taught her anything, Felicia had certainly learned how to pleasure her husband and the most sensitive parts of his body. She enjoyed listening to his moan as she fondled his member till it was rock hard and dripping with excitement.

"If you continue doing that, I'll find my climax sooner than I would like," Ernest said, taking her hands and resting them on his chest as he pulled her against his body. His member slipped between her legs, rubbing against the opening of her core. She was so wet that soon his member was covered with her inner juices.

"If you find your climax, then I will just need to harden you again and again till you can help me find mine," Felicia teased, rocking her hips back and forth along with his long, thick member.

"I love how you seduce me," Ernest growled, running his fingers through her hair and enjoying the silky feeling of the texture in his hands.

"I love how you make my body instantly react to yours," she replied.

He chuckled as he knelt down before Felicia, taking each of her

breasts in his hands as he began to lick and nibble on her most sensitive mounds and nipples. Felicia arched her back and tilted back her head as she moaned. She loved the way Ernest pleased her body and made her do things she never thought was possible. Like making love in their art room, moaning as though there was no tomorrow.

“You like that?” Ernest said with a chuckle, looking up at her as he massaged her tender breasts.

“Oh yes, I do,” Felicia confessed, her cheeks flushed as she looked down into his blue eyes.

“Let’s see what other noises I can tease from your lips,” Ernest said, his eyes hooded with lust. Felicia felt a great sense of excitement as she watched him, wondering what else he had in mind.

Ernest lowered himself till his face was lined up with her hot core. Felicia’s eyes went wide as she watched him, as he leaned forward and began to lick her most sensitive nub just like he had her nipples.

She gasped with surprise, having never thought that a man could do such a thing to a woman. She raised herself up onto her tiptoes, thrusting her hips forward to give him better access to her most private parts.

“Oh, Ernest,” she moaned as she laced her fingers in with his hair. His tongue danced around her most sensitive nub before he sucked it into his mouth. She closed her eyes, certain that she would be nearing her climax shortly. He then raised a hand and slipped three fingers deep inside her core, causing her to moan loudly.

“Oh, please don’t stop,” Felicia begged, her body shaking as Ernest brought her to her climax. She moaned loudly as she rode the waves of pleasures as Ernest continued his onslaught of her body.

“I think someone liked that,” Ernest said with a chuckle as he removed his skillful tongue from her core and slowly withdrew his fingers. “Now, I think it’s my turn.”

“Rightfully so,” she giggled as she took his member in her hands and began to massage him. “It makes me wonder if I could do the same thing to you that you’ve done for me.”

“Felicia, my love. That isn’t necessary. That sort of thing is normally only done by the women at Madam’s gentlemen’s club,” Ernest said, swallowing hard.

“But I am your loving wife who wants you to feel all sorts of pleasure,” Felicia replied. “You’ve given me such a wonderful life that I want to make sure you feel the same.”

“Trust me, my love. You make me happier than any sort of pleasure could,” Ernest said seriously.

“Then let me show you just how much I love you,” Felicia replied, kneeling before Ernest. He watched her with wide eyes as she positioned herself before his member. Curiously, she slipped the head of his member into her mouth and began to suckle.

Ernest hissed with pleasure as every muscle in his body seemed to

respond. He placed one hand gently on the back of Felicia's head, guiding her back and forth as she gripped his girth and continued to massage him as her tongue danced over his head. She could tell that he was enjoying the pleasure she was offering and continued to experiment with what she could do to her husband.

"Oh, Felicia. I want you. I can't wait any longer," Ernest said, slowly guiding her to her feet once more.

"Did you like it?" Felicia asked with a smile.

"I loved it," Ernest said, gritting his teeth. "But I won't want to finish in your mouth."

"Alright then," Felicia said, turning around and bending over the edge of the table. She propped herself up on her elbows and arms and looked over her shoulder at Ernest. She wiggled her buttocks for Ernest, causing them both to chuckle.

"Temptress," Ernest said, gripping onto her buttocks with his hands. He then guided the head of his member to her hot core and slowly pushed forward through her wet opening.

"Oh, Ernest!" Felicia moaned freely, not afraid of being heard or being walked in on. Their two servants wouldn't be back till the shop was closed and everything would need a bit of tidying. Therefore, Felicia knew that they had plenty enough time to enjoy the pleasures of husband and wife.

"You like that?" Ernest teased, slowly rocking in and out of her hot

core from behind.

“Yes! Please don’t stop!” Felicia begged, feeling her climax coming quickly already.

“As you wish,” Ernest grunted, gripping onto her hips and thrusting into Felicia as fast as he could. Soon, she was climaxing hard against his member, her walls squeezing him lovingly till he was losing his seed deep inside of her.

Ernest and Felicia were both panting hard as they came down from their high. Slowly, Ernest removed himself from deep inside of her, both of them so wet that it wasn’t hard to see that they needed to freshen up. With their clothes in their hands, they made their way quickly up to their apartment before anyone saw their naked hides through the shop windows.

It was moments like this that Felicia truly felt alive. She could be silly with her husband, discover all manner of pleasure with him, and truly have her heart opened to a man that truly loved her in return. Risking it all for Ernest had been the best decision in her life.

## ***THE END***

*Can't get enough of Felicia and Ernest? Then make sure to check out the*

*[Extended Epilogue](#) to find out...*

*What kind of secrets will Felicia share only with her husband?*



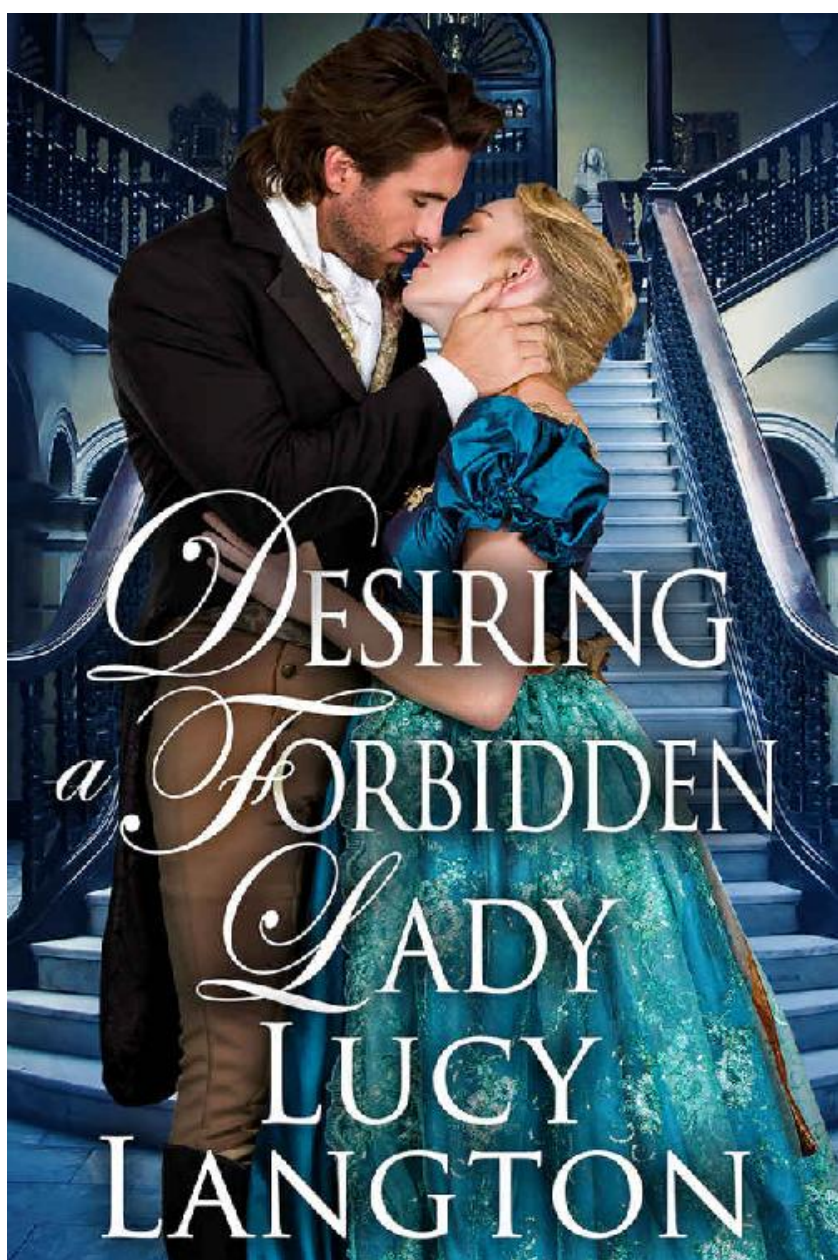
*Why will Mrs Hooten come stay with Felicia and Ernest and why would they feel she is a blessing to them?*

*What kind of mysterious letter will Ernest receive and how will he react when he reads it?*

Click the link or enter it into your browser

<http://lucylangton.com/felicia>

*(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first chapters from “**Desiring a Forbidden Lady**”, my Amazon Best-Selling novel!)*



DESIRING  
*a* FORBIDDEN  
LADY  
LUCY  
LANGTON

# Desiring a Forbidden Lady

## Introduction

The alluring Harmony Chance has been excitedly looking forward to her first Season in Town with her aunt, uncle and cousin Margret. Her cousin on the other hand, doesn't share the enthusiasm about entering high society, as she feels devastated about her arranged marriage. To Harmony's surprise, the source of her cousin's tragedy is the most seductive man she has ever seen. To make things even more complicated, he also seems to be enchanted by her and soon, his scorching kisses set her heart on fire. The more time she spends with the beguiling Daniel, the more she finds herself wondering... Why does a man who is completely wrong for her, make everything feel so right in his arms?

Lord Daniel Mavis has been trying to commit to the promise his father made to Lord Chance, that he would marry his daughter Margret, when she came of age. However, after realizing that Margret is someone he could never love or desire, he is struggling to honour a promise that precedes his existence. As if this wasn't enough, he becomes completely captivated by Margret's enticing cousin, Miss Harmony Chance. To Daniel, she is the most tempting woman he has ever laid his eyes upon and she is quite witty as well. However, when the Earl of Flanagan takes a serious interest in Harmony and tries to conquer her heart, Daniel will have to make a difficult decision. Is he willing to fight for the woman he is passionately falling in love with,

or will maintaining his good reputation mean more to him?

The more Harmony and Daniel fall for each other, the more Daniel tries to push her away and fulfil his family duty by accepting a loveless future. Soon, they will have to choose paths that will dramatically change their lives. Caught between an arranged marriage and a wicked antagonist lord, will they choose to risk it all for a lust too overwhelming to resist? Or will this undeniable passion be buried once and for all?

## Chapter 1

Lord Daniel Mavis, Earl of Prescott, walked the empty halls of his manor in the countryside as he made his way to the study. It was another beautiful spring day as morning sunlight poured in through the many open windows of the large estate.

He'd requested the windows to be open to let in as much as fresh air as the days continued to grow warm. The mixture of the fresh scent of spring and the solution that was used to polish the wooden floors was a pleasing smell to Daniel as he walked through his manor to the desired room.

Prescott Manor had been in his family's care for over three generations. As the sole heir to the manor and title of Earl, Daniel had gone to great lengths to ensure that the estate remained in its best condition. The wooden floors throughout the house were cleaned and polished regularly, even though he hardly had guests in the countryside. He knew that most of society had changed floors from wooden to marble to reflect French influence on the country despite the war. However, Daniel was determined to keep things the way they were at his manor and not allow changing influences to affect his childhood home.

Portraits lined the hallways of past family members and landscapes of Prescott. They were like old friends greeting him as Daniel made his way through the house. The paintings were the same from when he was young, the frames polished and the portraits dusted on a regular basis, as per his request. The curtains in the rooms, most particularly the drawing and sitting rooms, were taken down once a month and scrubbed even though he rarely smoked his pipe and guests to Prescott Manor were few and far between.

As Daniel finally reached the study at the end of the long main hallway, he entered a space he could easily picture his father in. Though his parents had both passed five years ago, he felt their memories still close to him. Countless times he'd found his father in the study, mulling over papers of business and always willing to teach Daniel the management of the Earldom.

Daniel paused at the doorway to the study and smirked, thinking of all the times he'd sat beside his father and reviewed papers and letters from the tenants. His father had always wanted to make sure all was well within their lands.

Now, Daniel positioned himself beyond the mahogany desk that was inlaid with green velvet. On top of the desk was a stack of letters he needed to reply to, and a good man still to open. He knew he could have left all manners of business to his trusted steward, but found that being more hands on with his enterprises kept him focused and out of trouble, unlike other Earls his age of twenty and eight years. Daniel didn't travel to town except for matters of business, or to attend social gatherings to keep up appearances with the Ton. He stayed away from gambling halls and all matters of temptation.

The study was lined with bookshelves of ledgers that he could refer to in order to discover trends through the years. All the history of Prescott Manor was kept in the study for quick access. He felt his father had prepared him well for the position of Earl, to include what his future would hold for him. Daniel sighed as he glanced at the letters, knowing that not all of them were letters of business. He also had quite a lot of letters from the Chance family and the upcoming Season in Town.

Daniel's late father had been a close friend of Lord Philip Chance, Earl of Bentley. Lord Chance's estate was riding distance from Prescott, and Daniel used to frequent the estate when his father was alive. It was when he had reached manhood that his father had confessed to him that Margret Chance, Lord Chance's daughter, was his intended. That

their marriage had been planned in his infancy. Having a great sense of honor, Daniel hadn't argued or put up a fuss. He knew it was the tradition of families of wealth and thought that marrying the daughter of an Earl was a reasonable choice.

However, now that the time drew near for their wedding, their engagement already being announced in the papers, Daniel had a strange feeling of dread every time he thought of Margret Chance gracing the halls of his manor each day. Though a beautiful woman with hair the color of roasted chestnuts and matching depths of brown in her eyes that could entice any young man, Daniel knew much of the young woman's character over the years.

Daniel knew the young lady was a materialistic woman who enjoyed the finer things in life. Granted, her father could easily afford such luxuries and her mother was very encouraging of such an outlook on life. Daniel would describe Margret as very fashion forward and always looking to impress those gathered in a room. She was skilled at the pianoforte, which was a common indulgence of young unmarried women to serenade a prospective suitor.

Though Daniel would honor his family and his father's dying wish that he marry Margret, he found no pleasure in it. He figured Prescott Manor was big enough for the two of them to be married but live their own separate lives. Perhaps at some point Daniel would be able to love Margret, no doubt when she started to birth their children.

He even wondered if married life would make Margret more attractive to him in the sense that her silly ideologies would fade away and she would become easier to love when she wasn't so focused on the style of her gown or the way her hair had been done that day. More than anything, he hoped she wouldn't become such a gossip like he knew Lady Chance was.



“Morning, my Lord,” greeted Mr. Luke, the butler for Prescott Manor. He brought in a breakfast tray and set it on the edge of the large mahogany desk before bowing his head.

“Good morning, Mr. Luke. How does the day fare for you?” Daniel asked as he pushed the matter of his upcoming wedding out of his mind and pulled the tray forward. He lifted the silver lid off the porcelain plate and set it aside to reveal a wonderful assortment of breakfast sausages, poached eggs, and buttered toast. As he waited for his food to cool, he poured himself a cup of black tea and added a bit of fresh cream.

“The day is well, thank you. Johnathan is packing your trunks as we speak for your upcoming trip to Town. The carriage will be ready for you by mid-afternoon to start your travels,” Mr. Luke explained. “The majority of the staff has left this morning for Town to prepare the townhouse for your arrival.”

Daniel nodded before taking a sip of tea, appreciating the morning reports. “Thank you, Mr. Luke. See to it that all further posts are rerouted to my townhouse. I filed the update with the postmaster, but I’m sure some letters will be lost nonetheless.”

“With your engagement announced, I’m sure most will know you’ll soon be in town,” Mr. Luke said with a smirk. Daniel nodded, averting his eyes. The staff was certainly excited for a new lady of the house and the prospect of children soon. Daniel was trying not to show his uneasiness about it all to his butler.

“That is a good point,” Daniel said with a forced smile as he took another sip of his tea.

“You know, it is not uncommon for a man to be nervous when preparing to be married,” Mr. Luke spoke up just as Daniel was about to take a bite of breakfast sausage.

Daniel put down his fork and looked up at his butler, seeing the graying around his temples when his hair was normally black as coal. Dressed in his livery attire, Mr. Luke was always punctual and dressed for every occasion, even though there was rarely an occasion at Prescott Manor.

“I thank you for your advice,” Daniel said with a nod. Mr. Luke was always someone Daniel knew he could talk to if he needed guidance. Yet, he didn’t feel comfortable sharing his deep feelings with the man.

“Enjoy your breakfast, my Lord,” Mr. Luke said with a bow before leaving Daniel in peace.

Daniel focused on his breakfast, trying not to worry about his upcoming trip and all the events that would soon ensue in regard to his marriage. The event itself wouldn’t take place until the end of the Season in Town, a very traditional thing to do. Therefore, he had all the Season to hopefully get to know Margret better and if fate were in his favor, he would fall in love.

When Daniel was finished with his breakfast, having mopped up the running egg with his toast and consumed two cups of tea, he placed everything aside on the breakfast tray and turned his thoughts and focus to the letters of business on his desk. With a fresh stack of writing paper to his right, his inkpot in front of him, and a fine quill in his hand, he began addressing the letters.

Most of the letters were from his various tenants who had written him

informing him of the current state of their affairs. Most had overcome the winter months without any issues and now were preparing the land for the spring planting. However, there were two families who had lost loved ones during the winter, causing them to experience a grim turn of events. It was these tenants that Daniel would write and assure them they would be taken care of.

Daniel's father had taught him from a young age that it was the Earldom's tenants that allowed for their family to live a life of luxury. However, all of what they had would quickly go away if they didn't take care of their tenants in return. Daniel therefore made sure all the many tenants were taken care of so they could continue their way of life. It was a circle of sorts that Daniel felt he played an instrumental part in. If he kept up his part of the circle, his fortunes would continue to be strong.

Daniel ran his fingers through his dark brown hair as he turned his focus then to letters of social matters. With the news of his engagement, and soon travels to Town, he'd already started to receive letters of invitation to different social events, from balls to charity galas, that would take place at the popular Hyde Park. Daniel knew that being present at these events would do a great deal to sustain his reputation with the Bon Ton of Town – the elite of society who deemed whether a person was worthy of their title, and who could destroy a family with a slip of gossip that could circulate faster than water going down a drain.

The worst part about residing in Town was having to deal with the Ton and the rampant circulation of gossip. No one could be certain what was true or false when words were whispered between the wealthy women of society. But gossip was often published in the many papers of Town, and he wished never to be seen in the papers if it was not for his benefit. He'd worked hard to maintain his reputation and the name of Prescott. Therefore, he always made sure to be very careful when he was in Town.

As he sifted through the letters, he only focused on those from very elite families that had great reputations from what he'd learned from the papers and his business relations in Town. He would be appearing in society with Margret at his side and needed her to be introduced to the best of the best.

Daniel had plans for his future bride to ensure they had a good reputation at the beginning of their marriage. And though he didn't plan to spend much time in Town in the future, preferring the quiet of his countryseat, he wanted to leave Town with that good reputation intact.

Reputation had been very important to his father, and therefore was very important to Daniel. He strived to uphold the honor of his family in all ways that he could. This wedding would be the longest amount of time he'd been in Town since his father had passed away. It also meant a new chapter in his life. Though he liked to think that his life would continue as normal once he and Margret returned to Prescott Manor, he would also be mindful of his new wife and her needs and wants. As long as his family name stayed out of the gossip trains and the muck, he would be happy.

"My Lord," Mr. Luke spoke up as he came into his study. "A letter from Lord Chance." The butler came forth and produced the letter before bowing and removing the breakfast tray from his desk. Daniel waited until he was alone before he opened the letter and read it slowly aloud.

"Dear Lord Mavis,

What great joy I have as I write this letter. My family and I prepare for our journey to Town this morning and look forward to seeing you at the engagement ball in a fortnight. My wife and daughter very much look forward to the event and the joining of our families.

I have looked forward to this day with great anticipation ever since Margret was born. Joining our families together was much discussed with your parents, and I am pleased that you have committed to upholding this arrangement.

We look forward to seeing you in Town. Miss Harmony Chance, my niece, will also be traveling to Town with us. She will be debuting this year for the Season and will be present for the wedding as well.

Safe travels,

Lord Chance, Earl of Bentley.”

Daniel tried to think if he'd ever met Miss Harmony before. He knew that Lord Chance had a younger brother that was a baron of a small piece of land with only two tenants. Such was the fate of the younger brother, to inherit the lesser of the titles. When he was born, his mother said they didn't try for any other children because a younger brother would have little to inherit and would have been left only with the options of becoming a member of the cloth or joining the militia.

Of all the times he'd been to Bentley Manor, he hadn't met the Earl's niece. He had heard Margret speak of her before, that she was a close friend, and her father was very doting of her since her father didn't have much means. Other than that, Daniel had no thoughts surrounding the young lady and only hoped she would be of good

company.

Feeling no need to reply to the Earl's letter when they would soon meet in Town, Daniel rose from his desk, his morning routine of business finally coming to an end. Managing the Earldom was not a business that took all his time. After reviewing letters in the morning and penning about a dozen responses, he took to his favorite pastime.

With his riding boots on, Daniel picked up his leather gloves at the door along with his riding coat. The spring air still nipped when he went horseback riding. As the footman opened the front door for him, he stepped out in the late morning sun and enjoyed the feeling of the sunlight on his skin. England could be such a dreary place, with plenty of cloud cover, but today seemed to be very bright and sunny without a cloud in the sky.

"My Lord," the stable hand said in greeting as he came to the stables. Daniel was pleased to see that his chestnut gelding was already prepared and saddled for his late morning ride. He took the reins of the horse and thanked the stable hand before walking the horse out of the stable and towards the riding trail.

It was while horseback riding that Daniel felt like he was completely free. He pushed his gelding into a fast gallop along the riding path that wound around his estate. As they disappeared into a dense part of the forest, the sun was blocked, and the air became cool. Everything that concerned Daniel faded away. He wasn't dreading the upcoming wedding or being seen in Town for such an extended period of time. He didn't worry about the upcoming balls, galas, and trips to the theater to keep up appearances. The only thing that had Daniel's attention was the pace of the horse, the direction they were going, and what was coming up ahead.

Prescott Manor was host to an impressive landscape that had been a

painter's inspiration. With rolling hills, forests, and several ponds that were well stocked, Daniel was well pleased with his ability to keep up the grounds surrounding the manor. It was always pleasant to walk through them when the rose bushes that his mother had planted were in bloom. Daniel enjoyed his time at Prescott Manor and would be content if nothing ever changed.

As Daniel eventually made his way back to the stables, needing to get ready to depart his home for Town, his thoughts turned back to Margret Chance. He hoped that her character had perhaps changed since the last time they had met during Christmas. Perhaps she had become more mature, of good character, and less materialistic.

Daniel could hope for the whole world, considering how serious a commitment marriage was. The last thing he wanted to do was regret his wife for the rest of his life and become a very miserable person. Family duty or not, Daniel wanted to maintain his happiness.

## Chapter 2

Miss Harmony Chance stood in her cousin's bedchamber as she fussed with her lady's maid once more about the contents of her trunks. They were to leave in a few hours and Harmony thought her dear cousin Margret was being too particular. However, since they were both raised by fathers of different standing in society, Harmony deduced that Margret's behavior was based on her upbringing and doting parents.

"Miss Blane, please make sure my lavender velvet gown is packed. I must wear that to the first available ball," Margret said as she thumbed through her wardrobe. Harmony didn't think any more gowns could possibly fit in her trunks, and it seemed that everything that Margret owned had to accompany her to town.

"Lady Margret, your mother has already stated that you shall have new gowns once you arrive to Town and are fitted with the Season's trends," Miss Blane reminded her, having learned to be very patient with her charge.

"I suppose you're right," Margret said with a sigh. "Harmony, would you like to look through my gowns? We are of similar size and you would look rather handsome in them."

"Thank you, Margret," Harmony said with a smile. "But Lady Chance has informed me as well that I shall join in your fitting. Since I shall be debuting, she is determined I need to be the belle of every ball."

"Oh, Harmony, you are so lucky to be attending the Season as a single young lady," Margret said with sigh as she gave up the pursuit of



rearranging her trunks and joined Harmony sitting before the fireplace. Harmony was sipping a cup of lavender tea before their long journey to Town.

“I do consider myself lucky to be going to Town with your family,” Harmony agreed as she tucked back a loose strand of her blonde hair. “Uncle Philip is rather kind to invite me to attend with you.”

“But I shall not enjoy the Season as I did last year, because I am already intended. No man will give me his attention. It is rather hard to flirt and feel the romance in the air when I am not paid much attention,” Margret said with a sigh.

“What is Lord Mavis like anyways?” Harmony asked.

“Oh, Harmony, he is the most boring of all men I have ever met. Anytime we have dined with him and his family or vice versa, I have dreaded keeping company with the man. He talks of nothing but his business and state of affairs with Father and has no real experience with society. He stays home in the country and doesn’t frequent Town,” Margret said with disdain in her voice as she fidgeted with her fingers. Harmony knew Margret was very nervous about her upcoming marriage, even if she wasn’t willing to admit it.

“Does the man have a good reputation?” Harmony asked. Margret nodded in reply as she fixed herself a cup of tea. “And a good fortune?”

“One of the best, according to my father,” Margret replied before sipping on her tea. She frowned and added another cube of sugar and stirred it around before resuming to drink.

“Margret, you shall want for nothing when you are married to Lord Mavis. Though he might not be the best company, you’ll not have to fear about your future,” Harmony reasoned. Margret stilled as she looked at her cousin and then sighed as she set her cup aside.

“Forgive me, Harmony. I often forget our differences. From your perspective, you must think I’m being quite a snob towards Lord Mavis.”

“If I had such a good prospect, I would not speak the way you do,” Harmony reasoned. “I am the daughter of a Baron, the lowest of the classes in society. If I receive an offer of marriage from a viscount, that would be more than I could ever hope for.”

“Harmony, with my father adding to your dowry, you shall certainly become the bell of every ball and the debutante that everyone speaks of. I should set your eyes on an earl and not consider any others below that,” Margret said confidently, a smirk coming to her red lips. “If I cannot choose who I am to marry, then I shall ensure that you do.”

“That is very kind of you,” Harmony said as she placed her blue eyes on the rim of her porcelain teacup. “You have always shown me the greatest kindness.”

“Why of course,” Margret replied happily. “You are family, after all, and the closest thing I have to a sister.”

Harmony had never met Lord Mavis before, but from her cousin’s account, he was a dreadfully boring person with no attractive qualities besides his wealth. He was also ten years older than they both were.

“Alright darlings, let us be off,” Lady Chance said as she came into the bedchamber with an air of elegance. Both Aunt Fiona and Margret were always elegantly dressed. Even though they would be riding by carriage for the next few days to reach London, her aunt was dressed in a light blue gown of silk that almost looked like silver. On her shoulders was a white fox fur coat to protect from the chill of the spring air.

“Has the time come already?” Margret asked as she stood. “But Miss Blane is still packing my things.”

“Margret, your trunks need to be loaded on the carriage immediately if we are going to make good time to the first inn along our journey. Anything you might need, we can easily find in Town,” Aunt Fiona said happily, taking her daughter by the elbow and leading her from the room. “Come now, Harmony.”

Harmony stood without speaking as she set her cup aside and followed the Countess. Harmony also thought her aunt was rather beautiful with her long dark brown hair and her stance that was ever so poised. Having been fortunate enough to have a governess, Harmony had learned much about the ways of married women and how to be a proper lady to attract a suitable husband. However, Harmony had always struggled with how she should act and the natural way she felt.

As Harmony walked behind Aunt Fiona and Margret through the corridors of Bentley Manor, she couldn't help but notice all the finery. Having only visited the manor for special occasions and holidays, she always marveled at the splendor of it all.

The manor had recently been redone in the latest trends in society to include marble flooring throughout. New fabrics had been ordered for all the furniture so they could be reupholstered, and the curtains were taken down and changed to shades of greens and blues instead of the rich burgundies that used to grace the manor. Harmony had to say that the estate was much lighter than it used to be with the dark hardwood floors and the tones of red and gold.

She held onto the rail as they went down the steps of marble towards the front door where Uncle Philip was waiting for them. He was already wearing his riding cap and jacket, seeming to be anxious to arrive in Town as soon as possible. Harmony was simply happy to be joining the family in Town and be able to get the opportunity to attend the Season. This could very well be her only opportunity to secure her future with a suitable husband of good respect.

"Afternoon, ladies. Are we all set to make our way to Town?" Uncle Philip asked as they stepped out onto the landing and approached the front door.

"Margret's things will be loaded momentarily," Aunt Fiona explained. "It shouldn't be too much longer."

Uncle Philip gestured towards the footmen at the door and they set off towards Margret's bedchamber in a hurry.

"I do want to make the Dancer Inn before nightfall," Uncle Philip said as he turned his eyes towards Margret. "You must remember never to make your husband late when you marry."

"Yes, Papa," Margret replied as she lowered her eyes. Harmony knew that her aunt and uncle had no idea how Margret felt about her

upcoming marriage. Margret was doing her best to be the dutiful daughter, while inside she was dreading such a union with a man she did not love.

“Harmony, are you looking forward to the Season in Town?” Uncle Philip asked, catching her attention as she looked away from Margret.

“Yes, Uncle. I have heard many great things about London and look forward to seeing it for myself,” Harmony said with a smile.

“Town is not as glamorous as my wife no doubt made it sound to be,” Uncle Philip said with a chuckle. “It is a crowded place with much wealth as well as poverty. One must be careful about their surroundings.”

“Oh, Philip. You make Town sound like a dangerous place,” Aunt Fiona tsked, shaking her head. “London is a wonderful, bustling place. There is such convenience, and many wonderful families to dine with on a regular basis. Anything can happen in a place like that.”

“Let us be off,” Margret spoke up, her voice stiff.

“Good idea. No point talking about the place when we have yet to leave the house,” Uncle Philip said as he led the way to the carriage. He was kind enough to help all the women up into the carriage before stepping up himself and getting comfortable next to his wife. They waited patiently for the last of the trunks to be tied on before the driver flicked the reins and set them forward towards London.

There was peace and quiet in the carriage for a bit as it was led down

the lane towards the main road. Harmony looked off in the distance, observing the vastness of the Earl's lands. She knew not to compare such a place to her own abode. Harmony just kept reminding herself of all she had to be grateful for. Her uncle was taking her under his guardianship for the Season in the hopes she would marry well.

Harmony had no memory of her mother, having been told she died when she was very young. Her father had gone to great lengths to provide her care and all that she needed to be raised into a fine young woman. Harmony could easily say that kindness ran in the family. Though Uncle Philip had inherited the Earldom, he had always made sure his brother and niece were well taken care of.

Growing up, Harmony had had the opportunity to learn all sorts of things from reading, to writing, to a bit of the Italian language that her father still remembered from his own upbringing, as well as how to paint and draw. She'd been given the opportunity to learn to play the piano like Margret, but she cared little for the practice, though she loved to listen to music.

Of all the pastimes that Harmony participated in, it would be taking long walks to gather her thoughts that she enjoyed most. From a young age, her father had always complimented her on her ability to critically think. Often sharing in the daily happenings of the estate, Mr. Chance always kept Harmony up to date on what was going on with their lands and the condition of their two tenants.

Since most of the land was used for farming, together they would discuss crops, growing seasons, and the best markets to sell their produce. Her father always included her in all things, allowing Harmony to gain a better understanding of the world.

*"My darling Harmony,"* her father had told her before she'd left for her uncle's estate on the other side of the village, *"I am hoping that you will*

*truly enjoy your time in Town. I hope that one day you will be married, but mindful of the gentlemen that will pay you attention. You are truly beautiful like your mother, and you will gain much attention.*

*“Some of the attention will be good and for your favor. You will be invited to so many parties. But women will be jealous of you and perhaps seek to ruin you by spreading gossip. You must never be caught alone with a gentleman. It is tragic how these things can happen to one who is not used to the ways of Town.”*

*“Father, I promise not to do anything that might be even considered scandalous,”* Harmony had replied. He’d coughed then, blaming the spring allergies for plaguing him so. *“Father, make sure to drink the tonic the apothecary gave you. Your allergies will get the best of you.”*

*“Fear not, my child. I’ll be well. Make sure to write me often so I may know how you are faring in Town.”*

*“Of course, Papa,”* Harmony had replied before kissing her father’s cheek and making her way to her uncle’s care.

Now, as the carriage rocked like a boat at sea as it was pulled along the main roads that would eventually lead them to Town, Harmony thought about the promises she’d made her father. She was to be on her best behavior and do her best to find a suitable match. By the end of the Season, Harmony wanted to be married to a good man much like Margret, but perhaps she could fall in love along the way.

*“Ladies, we shall have the seamstress come visit the townhouse the day after we are settled,”* Aunt Fiona spoke up, perhaps finding the silence of the ride less comfortable than the rest of them. Harmony’s focus was taken away from the scenery.

"I'm curious to know what the latest fashions are," Margret said with a smile, always having a taste for the finer things in life.

"Fabrics are going to be so important to choose," Aunt Fiona declared in an excited voice. "Cream silk for the finer balls, and layered greens and blues for the more common balls. Something a little acentric for the opera house, and modest gowns for walking at the park."

"That all sounds wonderful," Margret replied as she leaned back and took a deep breath.

"You should look your best this Season," Uncle Philip said to his daughter. "This is the time before you are married and start having children of your own." Harmony watched as Margret's smile faded at the mention of her marriage.

"But of course, I wouldn't want to outshine Harmony," Margret said, turning the conversation around. "She still needs to have all the advantages of our family to secure a suitable match."

"Yes, of course," Uncle Philip said with a nod. "You shall certainly learn quite a lot in Town."

"You are very handsome, Harmony," Aunt Fiona added. "I will not be surprised if your beauty attracts many suitors and invitations to social functions. Just remember your manners and you'll have no difficulties."



“Yes, Aunt,” Harmony quickly replied. She wanted to reassure her aunt and uncle, just like her father, that she would always choose what was best. That if she received an offer of marriage from a fine gentleman, that she’d be quick to accept such an offer.

Harmony tucked a strand of her blonde hair that hung in ringlets beside her face back behind her ear as she focused on the scenery once more. With her riding cloak tucked around her, she could practically fall asleep with the gentle rocking of the carriage. The bench upon which she sat was rather plush with soft fabric. Everything she happened to touch in the carriage felt soft enough to rest upon.

“Harmony, it’s important that you know about some of the most prominent families in town,” Aunt Fiona said, getting Harmony’s attention once more. “There are several other earls in town and their families. We should happen to dine with them on occasion, and there are a few with sons, or who are eligible themselves.”

“Are any of them handsome?” Margret asked with a giggle.

“I suppose you could say that,” Aunt Fiona replied. Harmony knew that her aunt and cousin frequently spoke of gossip. She knew that the both of them had a wealth of knowledge when it came to life in Town. “But you shouldn’t pay too much attention over the looks of men when you are spoken for. Let Harmony have the fun this Season.”

Margret nodded her head and looked out her window. Harmony could tell she was stunned into quiet by the comment when she normally could talk an entire evening away with her mother. Harmony wished there were something she could do to cheer her cousin up, or to save her from the predicament she found herself in.

“Margret, you must be of sound judgement for me,” Harmony spoke up. “I shall be attending the Season for the first time; visiting Town for the first. You must be my chaperone and escort through all of this so that I might make wise decisions.”

“Of course, dear cousin,” Margret said with a small smile on her lips as she looked at Harmony and took her gloved hand in hers. “I shall be with you every step of the way and will tell you more about the families and which ones to avoid.” They giggled over this, even causing Uncle Philip to chuckle. Harmony wasn’t sure what was going to be in store for her in Town, but she was certainly looking forward to it.

## Chapter 3

London proper was unlike anything Harmony could have imagined. The sounds, the strange smells, the views of all the amazing homes and modern buildings within walking distance of each other. It was surely incomparable to the countryside, the open fields, and the fresh air. Town was like a beast that had yet to be tamed with the constant foot traffic of locals and the pungent smell Harmony couldn't quite place.

Her uncle's townhouse was a lovely home with two stories of rooms. There was a room for visitors, another for private conversations, and a room to host parties and social gatherings. The dining room itself seemed to be as big as the bottom floor of her home in the countryside. All the elegance of the house with its marble floors and floral papered walls seemed to all attest to the fact that she was living in a place well above her station.

When Harmony felt overwhelmed by it all, she would take to the gardens outside the townhouse. Here, she could hear the distant sounds of Town that seemed to never cease, but she was blocked from the view of it all. She could find solace amongst the spring blooms and green grass. Just standing near the pond and listening to the trickling of water as she sat upon the stone bench helped her feel as though she was home surrounded by familiar things instead of the constant unknown of Town.

As promised, Aunt Fiona had the seamstress come to the townhouse the day after their arrival. Both Harmony and Margret were fitted for new gowns in time for the engagement ball for Margret and Lord Mavis. The gowns that were designed for Harmony were more fitting to the latest styles with short sleeves of thin material and lower necklines that could be decorated with scented clothes. Harmony would be dressed to attract a suitable gentleman, just like a flower attracts honeybees.

Margret, on the other hand, was fitted for gowns that would be more suitable for her new position in society as an engaged young lady. The sleeves were longer to the elbow of the same thicker material that would be used in making the gown. The neckline also was much higher to cover her bosom. Margret was not too pleased about this and was quick to share her opinion with Harmony when they were alone. She wanted to flirt with gentlemen till she was married, not appear as though she was mourning.

“Margret, Lord Mavis will not be pleased to see you flirting with men,” Harmony had said in reply to Margret complaining about the lack of romance she would feel during the Season. “Should you not try to flirt with your intended instead to create the sort of romance you are after?”

“Harmony, when you meet the boring man at the ball, you will completely understand my predicament. You can’t flirt with a man that you are not attracted to. It is that simple,” Margret had explained. “There is much I have to teach you about the ways of men.”

Margret was always willing to teach as much as Harmony was willing to listen to. She was told about men of all types that she would meet in Town. Those who were handsome and flirtatious but wanted nothing to do with marriage. There were those who were wealthy, but had been cursed with unfaltering looks, making it hard for a maiden to look their way. Then there were those who were determined never to marry and were rather stuck up, as Margret had described.

The type of man that Harmony was hoping to meet would be one that would show her kindness and was kind to those around him. She wasn’t very particular about looks like Margret was, but would like the man to be handsome, nonetheless. She smiled as she thought it would be nice if her husband were a good kisser, someone who could

ignite a fire inside of her just by holding her hand. Overall, if he had a good reputation and a large enough fortune to support them both, then Harmony would be satisfied.

“Do you think it will be wrong of me if I told my parents I was feeling sick?” Margret asked with a sigh as they stood in the fitting room off of Margret’s bedchamber as they were both dressed by their lady’s maids for the engagement ball.

“Margret, this is supposed to be one of the most magical nights of your life,” Harmony tried to encourage. “You will be the focus of the night. Everyone will be congratulating you and Lord Mavis. I’m not saying that you need to love your husband, but you must learn to be happy around him. Everyone will at least be expecting that.”

“How can I be happy when I know I’m fated to live the most boring marriage of all time?” Margret complained as her lady’s maid pulled the strings tighter on her corset to enunciate her bosom. Harmony was not willing to do such a thing to her body and was happy with her fitted gown and petticoats.

“Margret, you must make the most out of what life has given you. Trust me when I say that it is a life lesson I have come to learn and know very well,” Harmony said as she looked over at her cousin. Margret observed Harmony for a moment before pouting her lips.

When they were dressed in their finery for the ball, a slip of cloth tucked into the front of Harmony’s gown to cover the tops of her bosom, they sat down on a plush bench to have their hair curled and pinned. Since Harmony’s hair was naturally curly, it didn’t take her lady’s maid long to have her hair done.

A waft of lavender rose up from the cloth tucked into the front of Harmony's gown, helping her to relax. This was going to be her very first ball and she did not want to miss any part of it. After all, this could be the very ball where she met the man she was going to marry. Margret had assured her that many families would be in attendance at the dance hall.

"I've never seen such lovely ladies before," Aunt Fiona said in greeting as she came into the dressing room. "Oh, girls. I truly cannot wait for this evening's proceedings. You both have made me the happiest woman alive."

"Oh, Mother," Margret said with a chuckle. "I do hope you will not spend the evening in tears."

"I am just so happy for you, Margret. This is truly a monumental moment in your life," Aunt Fiona said as she gently embraced her daughter with happy tears in her eyes. "And to debut Harmony at the same time is such a sweet experience." Aunt Fiona came to Harmony then and lightly embraced her as well.

"Harmony will surely enjoy her evening. I do remember my first ball. So much excitement to be had," Margret said reassuringly.

"Now, I have gifts for you two beautiful ladies," Aunt Fiona said as she gestured towards the lady's maids. Harmony watched in awe as they went to the dresser and opened the top drawer, revealing two jewelry boxes. Harmony's lady's maid came to her and opened the blue velvet box to reveal a stunning string of luminescent pearls.

"Aunt Fiona, you've already done so much for me already," Harmony said as her lady's maid clasped the string of pearls around her neck.

“You may not be a daughter of an Earl, Harmony, but your father is of the gentry. You shall be presented to the Ton as an elegant young lady of good position in society. No one will dare look down on you,” Aunt Fiona explained. Harmony felt humbled as she looked between her aunt and cousin and saw their pleased smiles. She’d never felt this wonderful in her life.

“Alright then, let’s head downstairs. I can’t wait to see Harmony’s face when she sees the splendor of the ballroom,” Margret said, breaking the silence. Harmony nodded in reply, looking forward to seeing all of those who would be attending the ball and the wonderful gowns the other young ladies would be wearing.

Harmony followed her aunt and cousin from the dressing room as they made their way downstairs. She held up the hem of her light green gown as she descended the stairs, her hand holding fast to the railing so as not to slip on the marble stairs in her dance slippers. Her gown seemed to shimmer in the setting sunlight that peered in through the windows of the front hall, making her feel almost fairy like.

“Good afternoon, my dears. Are you all ready to head to the dance hall?” Uncle Philip asked as he joined them in the foyer.

“Yes, my dear,” Aunt Fiona replied for the three of them. Harmony glanced at Margret as the front door was opened by the footman. She could see the uneasiness in her cousin’s eyes as she fidgeted with a bit of ribbon secured to the middle of her gown. Harmony dearly hoped that Margret would enjoy her special night.

They all left the townhouse and stepped up into the waiting carriage. Harmony felt her heartbeat in her ears as the door was shut and

secured. She couldn't wait to see the dance hall, the way it had been decorated, and to have the opportunity to dance with a gentleman that evening. The possibilities felt endless as the carriage carried them through time to the ball.

The first thing Harmony noticed was the sheer amount of carriages and coaches that were outside the dance hall. There seemed to be a sea of people waiting at the front entrance to enter. Harmony was very surprised by the number of people in attendance and suddenly felt a shiver of fright. How was she supposed to impress so many people?

"Isn't it wonderful?" Uncle Philip said as the carriage came to a stop. "So many families have come to celebrate this wonderful union."

When the carriage door was opened, Uncle Philip alighted first and turned back to help his wife down from the carriage. The footman then assisted Margret and Harmony down from the carriage so they could make their way around the line of families waiting to enter. Harmony felt as though all eyes were on them as a soft whisper rose from the crowd. It would be the family's responsibility to welcome everyone that evening to the engagement ball.

"I wonder if Lord Mavis has arrived yet?" Margret murmured over her shoulder at Harmony. She focused then on her family as they entered the massive dance hall. Harmony was captivated by all the pillar candles positioned around the foray and the chandeliers that reflected light off the hundreds of crystal pieces, making the wooden floor that was freshly polished look like it was alive with light.

"Are you finally looking forward to seeing him?" Harmony asked as Lord and Lady Chance took up position by the entrance to welcome the guest to the ball while the two of them went into the ballroom itself. Harmony could smell the various scents of the many bouquets



in large vases that were set on tables filled with refreshments.

“I wouldn’t say that I am looking forward to seeing him, no,” Margret confessed as she picked up a glass of punch and started to sip on it while Harmony picked up a small bit of cranberry and cinnamon bread that she munched on while they walked together.

“I wish to at least know what he looks like. From your description of the man, he must be unpleasing to look at,” Harmony said as they made a circle of the room that slowly began to fill with guests to celebrate the engagement of the two like a river that gave way to a lake.

“I don’t fancy him one bit,” Margret said to Harmony before they were approached by different guests.

Margret became the bubbly hostess that Harmony had seen her become during Christmas time when she and her father would journey to Bentley Manor for the holidays. Margret smiled and laughed easily with those that congratulated her on the engagement, even though Harmony knew deep down that her cousin was not pleased. Harmony smiled as she was introduced to countless families, who she was having a hard time remembering. Overall, everyone seemed to be rather pleasant. That is, until a small group of young ladies approached them.

“Lady Margret Chance, how lovely it is to see you,” said a tall and slender young lady. Her black hair was curled and pinned to her head with what looked like a hundred pearl pins. Harmony had a bad feeling about this young lady and those in her company.

“Lady Bernard, I’m so pleased you could make it to my engagement

ball,” Margret replied. Harmony recognized the sarcasm in her cousin’s voice.

“Where is your intended anyways? I haven’t seen any sign of Lord Mavis,” Lady Bernard sneered. “Do you really think such a decent gentleman would marry a lady such as yourself?”

“Considering we’ve been intended since infancy, I am quite certain of my future with the Earl,” Margret said, her smile increasing.

“And who do we have here?” Lady Bernard asked, turning her eyes on Harmony. “A charity project to help people see that you’re not a total flirt?”

“May I introduce you to my cousin, Miss Harmony Chance,” Margret replied, not falling for the bait.

“I didn’t know you had a cousin...distant cousin I’m sure,” Lady Bernard said as she looked Harmony over with critical eyes. Harmony raised her chin, trying not to be afraid of what else the rude young lady was going to say.

“She is debuting this evening with a dowry of a thousand pounds,” Margret said sweetly. Harmony saw the shock in the other young ladies’ eyes and couldn’t help but smirk. “If memory serves me right, that is twice as much as any of you.”

“Come on girls,” Lady Bernard said with her nose pointed up. She swiftly left their presence with the other young ladies behind her.

“That was very unexpected,” Harmony said as she stepped closer to her cousin to talk quietly with her.

“Not for me it wasn’t,” Margret sighed. “I know how other young ladies act. They like to feel power based on the rank of their fathers and the money at their fingertips. They use it to put others down. However, you have one thing they don’t have. The best chance at marrying well this Season.”

“Makes me feel better about the encounter. It doesn’t seem as though they have a good opinion of you,” Harmony observed.

“I am bolder and more daring than other young ladies of society,” Margret said with a shrug of her shoulders, which was rather unladylike. “I’m not afraid to approach a gentleman if I think he’s attractive or might be a bit of fun.”

“Margret, you are engaged now. I do hope you won’t partake in such activities. You don’t want anyone to start rumors,” Harmony said.

“Fear not, dear cousin. I would never do anything to ruin this family,” Margret replied as she finished her punch and handed the glass off to a footman who was walking the ballroom to serve the guests.

Margret took Harmony by the elbow and continued to introduce her to several families. She enjoyed making the acquaintances of gentlemen that she found handsome upon first meeting them. Harmony tried to remember the advice her cousin had given her on the different types of gentlemen and the signs to look out for. But to Harmony, everyone seemed so nice and friendly.

“Oh shoot...there he is,” Margret said as she stood close to Harmony. She looked to see where her cousin was focusing and saw a tall gentleman with brown hair and deep eyes looking their way. Harmony was captivated by the man, curious to know who he was.

“Who is that gentleman?” Harmony asked, smiling as the man looked at her in return. She liked the way his eyes studied her, thinking he had to be one of the handsomest men she’d seen all night. His fine clothes fit him snugly, making it easy to see that he had toned muscles compared to the soft look of most of the other men. Harmony couldn’t wait to meet him.

“That would be the infamous Lord Mavis,” Margret said with distaste. “It seems my intended has made his appearance.”

Harmony was completely stunned. She felt rooted to the ground as she looked at Lord Mavis and tried her best to see the man the same way Margret did. Harmony had listened to Margret speak of the Earl as though he was unattractive and completely self-centered. But what Harmony saw before her was a handsome man she wanted to know more about. Realizing she was thinking about her cousin’s intended in this way, she quickly looked away and blushed.

“Come. Let me introduce the two of you,” Margret said. “Then you will truly understand why I don’t look forward to the wedding.” Harmony didn’t say another word as she was ushered forward by Margret. The closer she came to the man, the more feverish she felt. Harmony felt completely silly over the whole situation.

“Lady Margret,” Lord Mavis said in greeting, dipping his head and smiling. “It’s good to see you.”

“Pleasure to see you as well,” Margret replied simply as she curtsied.  
“May I introduce you to my cousin, Miss Harmony Chance.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Lord Mavis said as he focused his honey colored eyes on Harmony. She felt completely captivated by his gaze and wondered what on earth had come over her.

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